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August 24, 1892.

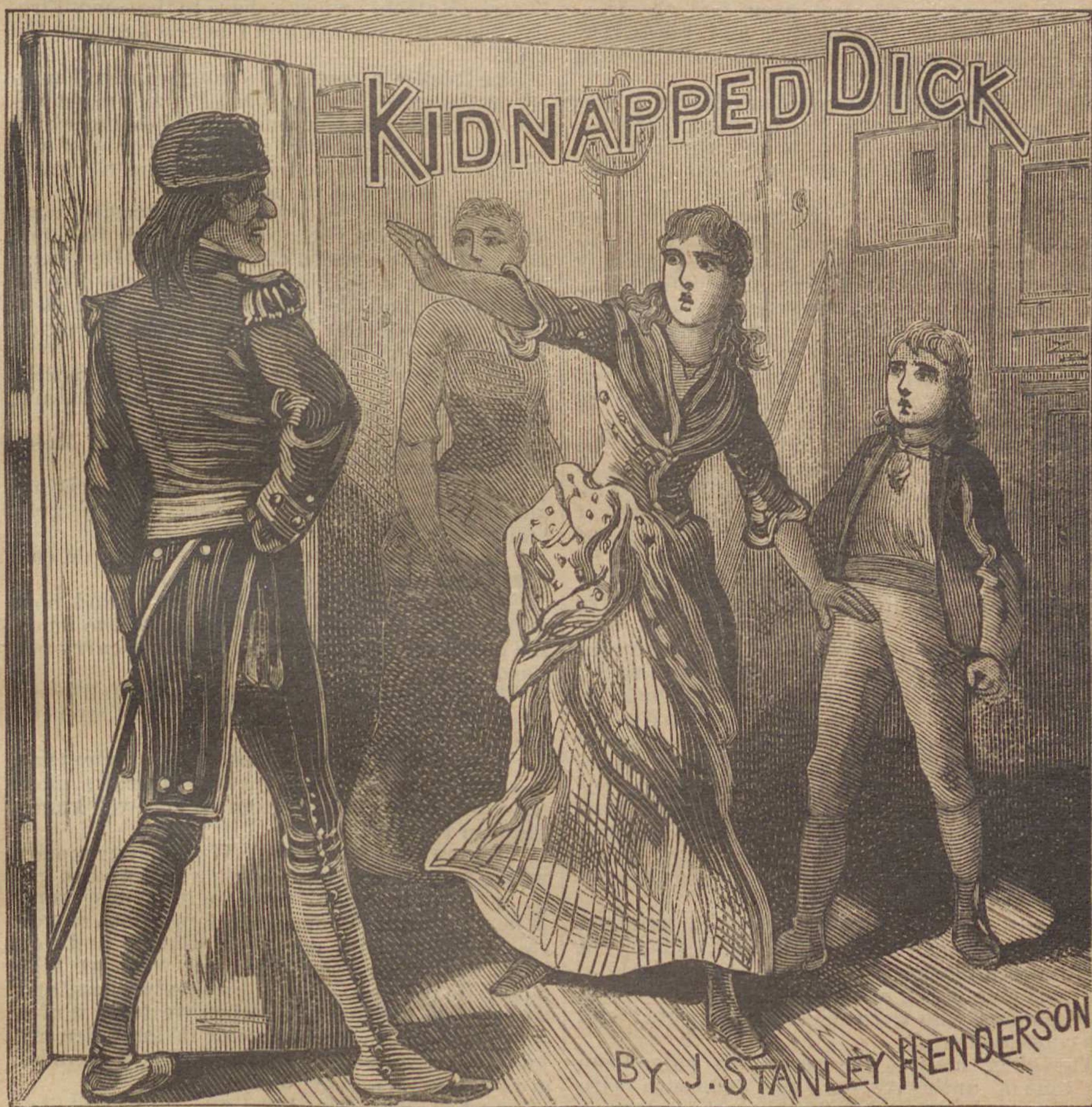
No. 450.

\$2.50
a Year.

Published Weekly by Beadle and Adams,
No. 98 WILLIAM ST. NEW YORK.

Price,
Five Cents.

Vol. XXXV.



BY J. STANLEY HENDERSON

"DON'T HURT HIM!" ENTREATED KATE, AS SHE PLACED HERSELF, WITH STREAMING EYES AND OUTSTRETCHED HANDS, IN FRONT OF THE BOY.

Kidnapped Dick;

OR,

THE FATE of the FIREFLY.

A TALE OF 1781.

BY J. STANLEY HENDERSON.

CHAPTER I.

THE FIREFLY AND HER FRIENDS.

UP the Coosaw River, in the old State of South Carolina, a narrow and deep bayou set into the mainland from the river, through which a vessel of some size could be poled or warped, until it reached what appeared to be the termination of the lateral outlet, where further passage seemed barred by the tall trees, and the overhanging network of branches and vines, that surrounded the water on all sides, except toward the river.

But the bayou did not end thus, for there was one place at which, by a yet narrower channel, a vessel could be forced into and through the mass of foliage, until it shot out, clear of all obstacles, into a broad and dark lagoon, where it could lie securely, out of the reach of storms or observation. The still water was shut in by immense trees, from whose gaunt and gloomy branches great masses of gray moss hung down, so thick and so low that the swampy shores were almost concealed by them. It was seldom that a breath of wind ruffled the surface of this sheltered lake, and there was an unpleasant, decayed odor in the atmosphere, that made one think the place was dead, and ought to be buried.

There was plenty of life in it, however, in the daytime, when bright-plumaged paroquets fluttered about in the foliage, and broad-winged insects skimmed and droned over the surface of the sluggish water. After nightfall the signs of life were yet more abundant, for then could be heard the croaking of frogs, the bellowing of alligators, and the mingled noises of innumerable other creatures.

At the time when our story opens—the evening of a sultry day near the close of summer—there were signs of human life in the dark lagoon. Near the marshy shore, its masts and cordage mingling with the dark branches and streaming moss, was a small schooner, whose black hulk was scarcely perceptible above the black water. She was a neat and trim little craft, quite a model of marine architecture for that day, low in the water, with sharp bows, slender and raking spars, and no house or caboose on deck to mar her symmetry.

All was quiet on board of the schooner, not even a light being shown in any part of her; but there was a blazing fire on the shore, made of resinous pine wood, around which were grouped four persons, who were evidently connected with the concealed craft.

The chief man of the group—to judge from his tone of authority, and the deference with which he was listened to by the others—was a short and bulky person nearly as broad as he was long, and apparently built for rolling rather

than for walking. He had a protuberant paunch, red and puffy cheeks, thin and straggling light hair, roguish little gray eyes, and a wide mouth. He was dressed in a sailor's blue roundabout, ornamented with tarnished gold lace, yellow breeches, long brown waistcoat, gaiters, and three-cornered hat. Such was Jants Petrikin, commander and principal owner of the schooner Firefly, a vessel which was part privateer, part smuggler, and part pirate, as circumstances rendered either character convenient or profitable.

Near him, on a log, was seated Malachi Slicker, a genuine Connecticut Yankee, long, lean, and hatchet-faced, with a calculating eye, sharp nose, thin lips, hollow cheeks, and a general appearance of being ready for a "dicker," and not to be outdone in a bargain. He was loosely dressed in a suit of homespun somewhat the worse for wear, and his feet were thrust into enormous boots. Malachi owned a share in the saucy Firefly, and acted as clerk and business agent of the craft.

Ben Ducket, a powerful young seaman, lounged on the grass, and watched Pomp, an old negro, who was toasting bacon and heating water by the fire. These were not all the crew of the Firefly, for there were half a dozen men "calking" on the deck of the schooner.

"'Tis hot enoof," said Captain Petrikin, with a grunt. "Dis is von goot place for hidin', but not goot for the health of our podies. Dere is no wind to stir a leaf, and de air smells like de graveyard, and de alligators howl, and dese leetle musketoes dey bite, bite, bite—hand me de Hollands, Ben Ducket."

A capacious jug was passed to the portly Dutchman, who elevated it to his mouth, and set it down with a grunt of satisfaction.

"What der tyfel we coomed here for, Malachi?" he impatiently asked.

"We come here for money, Cap'n Petrikin," answered the Yankee; "for King George's gold and bright Spanish dollars."

"But we've got our money safe in de oak chest, and what do we want more?"

"We were paid aforehand, cap'n, and now we're 'arnin' the money. We promised to bring the boy here, and I guess we've got to carry out the contract."

"If we had joost let de kinchin fall overboard, we might keep our money, and we need not be in dis hole."

"That's true enough; but there is more than one way of makin' money, and ginerally more than one side to take it from, as you well know, Captain Petrikin."

"I knows dat well enoof. We gets our money where we can, and we takes it where we can get it, no matter where or who it cooms from. When we takes de money of de patriots, as you call dem, den you does de business, and you hates King George and his men; when we take dat of de red-coats, den I does de business, and de patriots is all rebels; when we take it of a ship on de sea, or of a house on de land, den my jolly, brave crew does de work; but you and I always gets de money, Malachi."

"Just so, Mynheer; but I guess it's right, because we must look out for ourselves, and when people will get to fightin', it would be a temptin'

of Providence if we peaceable people didn't take our chances."

"Dat's de kind of morals for me, Malachi; but you mus'n't turn it against me. Take all odder people's money, but don't take mine, for a Dutch bear can bite."

"You don't mean to say, cap'n—"

"Don't mean to say not'ing—not'ing. I wants to know how we shall make money wid dis boy. De side dat paid is far away, and de odder side—we don't know where he is."

"There's no tellin' what may happen, and we'd better keep the keards in our hands, by knowin' where we can lay our hands on the chap if we should want him. That's all we have got to look after now, except to get in a cargo of blacks, and then make sail for Jamaiky, where we can sell the niggers, and bring back a cargo of rum for the red-coats."

"Joost so, Malachi; dat's what we coom for, and de sooner John Van Vorst shows his figure-head the better for us."

"Ye won't have to wait long for him, comrades," said a deep voice, which startled all the group, and a tall man stepped suddenly out from the darkness and stood by the fire.

The new-comer was not only tall, but powerfully built, and a life of activity and exposure had hardened his frame until his qualities of strength and endurance were developed to the fullest extent. The streaks of gray in his wiry black hair, and the seams and wrinkles in his rugged cheeks, showed that he had passed the middle age of man; but his flashing dark eyes, his firm-set lips, and the expression of determination in his countenance, gave evidence that he still retained the fire, the energy, and the fearless resolution of youth. He was dressed in a faded red coat, like those of the British soldiers, tattered nether clothes of homespun, a fur cap, and moccasins. In his right hand he carried a musket, a heavy saber was hung at his left side, and a pair of large pistols were stuck in his belt.

"Here you are, John Van Vorst," exclaimed Petrikin, bouncing up from his seat. "Speak of der infernal Satan, and he is just at hand! Take a swig of this stout Holland, my man, and tell us what scrape you are in now."

"Glad to see you," said Malachi Slicker, as he carefully put up his knife and extended his hand. "Calculate you've come to dicker about the niggers that you promised us."

"I am right glad to meet you both," replied Van Vorst. "I hope you bear about your stout body as bravely as ever, my bully Dutchman. You, Malachi, are as thin and bony as one of your salt-water herrings, but I am willing to swear that you haven't forgotten how to get the best of a bargain, or to finger a crown-piece. I'll not have a word to say to either of you, until I have something to eat and to drink."

"Try the Hollands, Van Vorst," said Jants. "'Tis right goot Nantz, as pure and honest as if de Firefly herself had brought it from de Zuyder Zee."

"I'll be sworn that it has learned no honesty since it has been in your company; but I won't look in the mouth of the horse that bears me well. Pass me the jug, comrade."

The negro placed his rashers of bacon on some broad leaves, and set them before the group, flanked by roasted potatoes and hard crackers, the jug of liquor occupying an important position on the grassy table. The four white men then proceeded to satisfy their appetites, washing down the bread and meat with copious draughts of Hollands.

"And so you want to know what scrape I am in now," commenced Van Vorst, as he lighted a pipe. "None, I can tell you, except such as you are in equally with me. I have been down toward Savannah, and was scouting along the coast, when I heard that the Firefly was at the mouth of the river, and then I came up here to meet you. We have had some hard work and close hiding lately, for the rebels have been making head again in this district."

"How does it affect you?" asked Malachi, "whether the patriots or the red-coats get the upper-hand?"

"Just this way—that they are at home to defend their houses and their property, and that they can spare time to hunt down us free-fighters who travel with a roving commission. I have been going about with my life in my hand, and have lost several of my best men. But that will soon change, comrades, for Lord Rawdon means to sweep the State, and his rough-riding troopers will soon give a good account of themselves. What have you brought for me this cruise?"

"What have you got for us?" inquired Malachi.

"As I live, that is a true Connecticut way of answering a question, but I suppose I must put up with your answers if I expect you to put up with mine. I have about sixty black-cattle, males, who are anxious to make a voyage to Jamaica, and in no hurry about returning. They will bring a pretty sum, and we will divide as usual. I would have had more—as many as the Firefly could carry—but Captain Jason, who is interested in most of them, has been driven away by the rebels, and some of our plans were spoiled. If you mean to stay here awhile, I can recruit another gang."

"I want to get out of this nasty hole so soon as I can," muttered Petrikin.

"Very well; you must take, then, such as you can get. What have you brought for me?"

"A boy," answered the Yankee.

"A what?"

"Joost a younker," grunted Jants.

"Are you laughing at me, comrades? I tell you that John Van Vorst does not allow himself to be laughed at. What do you mean by a boy and a younker?"

"Perhaps this letter will explain it to you," said Malachi, handing the ranger a sealed package.

Van Vorst broke the seal, and read the letter hastily.

"From Silas Warden," he muttered. "It is a long time since I have seen his handwriting. What cause of spite could he have against any British officer, that should make him rob his enemy of his only son. But that is no affair of mine, as he truly says, provided I am well paid for my services, and I shall be well paid. Yes, comrades; he speaks of having sent some money with the boy."

not'ing to do wid you more; so I give you dis ring."

The boy accepted the ring without a word, his sense of right not permitting him to return any thanks for what he regarded as his own, and quietly submitted to be taken away by Van Vorst. It was quite a relief to him to leave his close quarters on the schooner, and the unpleasant companionship of Peterkin and the Yankee, in comparison with whom he looked upon Van Vorst as a gentleman and a friend; but he was sad enough at heart.

He might well be sad, for the motherless boy had not only been kidnapped and taken from his father and his protectors, but had been deprived of his very patronymic, which he was forbidden to mention, and was thenceforth to be known by the coarse and vulgar name of Dick Van Vorst. When he thought of these things, tears would start into his eyes, but the high-spirited and proud-hearted little fellow checked them or brushed them away, and summoned up all his resolution, that he might look his fate in the face and make the best of it.

The stalwart ranger seemed to take a great interest in the lad, and was so friendly and communicative that Dick—as he must now be called—really forgot his trouble, and looked forward, with a boy's natural delight, to the strange and wild life that he was to lead in the woods among the free rangers of the Coosaw.

They rode on, over narrow causeways that crossed the dangerous swamps, surrounded by tall cypresses and overhung by luxuriant vines, along the skirts of palmetto thickets, through groves of giant live oaks, and over sandy barrens, keeping away from roads and the vicinity of human habitations, until they reached a seemingly impenetrable swamp, where they halted. Little Dick could not even guess where he was, or in what direction he had come, for, even if he had been old and experienced enough, he could not have tracked out the course that had been pursued by the ranger.

John Van Vorst had no difficulty in finding an entrance to the swamp. Passing through a clump of bushes, he came to a concealed path that had been cut through a cane-brake, and was thus led to a sluggish stream, or lake, which was crossed, at the narrowest part, by a rude bridge. Riding over the bridge, the man and the boy found themselves on a small but beautiful island, covered with an abundant growth of enormous trees, and adorned with blossoming vines and creepers.

From the shore of the island no sign of human habitation could be perceived, but, when they had about reached the center, they came in sight of five or six low cabins, that were old and shabby in appearance, but seemed comfortable enough, and looked quite picturesque under the shade of the tall trees.

As they approached the cabins, they were greeted by the vociferous barking of a number of dogs—bloodhounds, fox-hounds, and "curs of less degree," that came running out to meet them, and then by several rough-looking men, who were lounging about under the trees.

Van Vorst answered their rude salutations, and stopped his horse in front of a cabin that seemed somewhat neater than the rest, from

which came out an old negress, who threw up her hands and shouted as she saw him.

"Here you are ag'in, Mars'r John, safe back to de village. You's been ridin' home in de cool ob de mornin', like a good and keerful boy as you allers are. De laws bless us! what fur massy's sake hab you got dar?"

"It is a boy, old woman. Is it so long since you have seen a boy, that you have forgotten how they look?"

"Give him down here to me dis minute, Mars'r John. It does my ole eyes good, jest to look at him."

"Go to your Aunt Chloe, Dick," said Van Vorst, as he swung the lad down from the horse. "Wash him and brush him, old woman, and make him look nice. I will bring you some homespun cloth, of which you must make him something nice to wear, for those fine clothes would soon be torn off of him in the woods and swamps."

"What he goin' in de wood and swamp fur, Mars'r John? De boy sha'n't do no sich t'ing, now I tole yer."

"He is going to be one of the free rangers of the Coosaw, Chloe, and I'll be sworn that he will take to the life as naturally as a duck takes to the water. I must look him up a good swamp tackey for a pony."

Tying his horse to a tree, Van Vorst beckoned to one of the rough-looking loungers, a short-haired, undersized, bright-eyed, shaven-faced fellow, who was known among his comrades as Tom Murphy, and who acted as Van Vorst's lieutenant.

"What is the news, Murphy?" asked the ranger. "Has all been quiet at the camp since I left?"

"All has been quiet enough in the camp, cap'n, only Larkin and the Florida chap had a set-to, and Florida was laid up a few days; but there has been the Old Harry to pay up the Combahee, where a lot of Sumter's men got together, and made a clean sweep of our folks in that section."

"Do you hear anything more about Harry Forrest?"

"He has been swooping down across the Combahee, now and then, calling at his father's house, and acting as if he owned the country. I sent Brown Sam and Toxetter out on a scout, and Forrest caught Toxetter and strung him up. Brown Sam hasn't been seen since, but he is hard to catch, and he may turn up after a while."

"We must look after that youngster, Murphy, as soon as we get our other business off our hands. I will attend to his case myself. Petrikin has come with the Firefly, and we must get the niggers shipped as soon as possible. Are they all safe?"

"All safe enough and in good condition, captain, and all want to get away to the land of milk and honey that we promised to take them to."

"You had better start to-night with a squad of a dozen, and we will hurry the rest down while the road is clear. We will have to do a little foraging for the schooner, and we have no time to lose."

"I am keen for a tramp, captain, and the

"It is here," said Malachi. "The gold is safe on board of the Firefly, in a leather bag."

"That is right. I like gold, and I prefer to keep it in a leather bag when I have no strong box. It puzzles me to think that the gold should have been brought here at all, after being in the hands of two such accomplished rogues."

"Accomplished rogues—dat is good," said Petrikin, with an approving nod. "I t'ank you, Van Vorst, for de compliments. Accomplished is a goot word."

"I suppose that Malachi's sharp eyes are deeper into this matter than mine, although he does not know Silas Warden as well as I know him, and he thought it would be to his interest to bring the money safely."

"Malachi's eyes are very sharp, Van Vorst. He is von very accomplished rogue, though he is so lean."

"Well, let it pass. I am satisfied, if you are. I don't know what I shall do with the boy, for Warden says that I must keep him, and he must not be killed—as if I would think of hurting such a youngster as that. Where is he now, comrades?"

"On board the Firefly, in the cabin," answered Malachi.

"It must be fearfully hot in that close cabin, when the weather is so overcoming. Suppose you bring him ashore, and let me take a look at him, Jants."

"Yaw; you s'all see de younker. Go aboard de schooner, Ben Ducket, and bring de kinchin from de cabin."

"Bring the gold that you were speaking of, too," suggested the ranger.

"Get you aboard wid Ducket, Malachi, and bring dis alligator man his gold."

The Yankee and the seaman entered a small boat that lay at the shore, and sculled off to the schooner, while Petrikin and his guest again applied their lips to the jug of Hollands.

CHAPTER II.

THE SWAMP RETREAT.

SLICKER and Ducket soon returned from the Firefly, bringing with them the two articles that had been sent for—the boy and the bag. Van Vorst opened the bag, carefully counted the pieces of gold, replaced them, and then proceeded to inspect the boy.

The youngster appeared to be about ten years of age, and was as handsome as a boy-child can be, with long and curling hair, fresh and rosy cheeks, bright blue eyes, and an expression of mingled amiability, pride and daring. He was dressed in a fine suit of black velvet and satin, richly, not showily laced; but his apparel and his person in general had been sadly neglected; his hair was uncombed, and his clothes were rumpled and soiled. Van Vorst took him by the hand, bent his rugged face down to the smooth face of the boy, and interrogated him as he examined him closely.

"What is your name, my chicken?" he asked.

"George Colville Coningsby," quickly replied the boy.

"You answer mighty peart for your size. That may have been your name, youngster, but it ain't so any longer. Your name is Dick Van Vorst, now; do you know that, youngster?"

"I know that you say so."

"Be sure that you remember it, Dick, for that is the name you are to be called by hereafter. How would you like to go with me, and live in the free forest, and ride on a fine horse?"

"What's the use of askin' him that nonsense," grumbled Malachi, "when you know that he has got to go?"

"I had a pretty pony at home," answered the boy, "and I liked it very much. I want to go home to Aunt Mercy, and to see my father."

"Who's that Aunt Mercy of whom he speaks?" asked Van Vorst.

"That's the woman who was takin' care of the chick," replied the Yankee.

"Well, Dick Van Vorst—don't forget your name, youngster—as you can't go back to Aunt Mercy, you will have to put up with what mercy you can get here. You shall be one of the free-riding Coosaw Rangers, my boy, and you shall wear a sword and fight for your commander."

"I had rather fight for King George, and wear a scarlet coat, and gold epaulettes, and a feather in my hat, like my father's."

"You shall fight for the king, my brave youngster, and you shall be your own sovereign, to boot. I will take you to your palace, far in the free forest, and there you shall have an Aunt Chloe to wait upon you, for you need brushing up, pretty one."

"I won't go with you. If you make me go, I will run away, for I won't stay with you in your dirty den. My father will come with his sword and his soldiers, and he will punish you wicked people for taking me away."

"That is very stout talk, my brave little chicken, but it is only talk, for you are my boy, now, and you must do as I say. I admire your boldness, my lad, and promise you that you will make a capital Coosaw Ranger. Don't forget your name, Dick Van Vorst. I am not a man to threaten, but, if you pretend to have another name, I will do you a damage, and you had better not provoke me. Send him on board the schooner, Mynheer Petrikin, and let him have his supper and his bed, for we leave in the morning."

The boy was taken back to the schooner by Ducket and the negro, but Van Vorst remained with Petrikin and Slicker, by the remnant of the fire, smoking and talking confidentially until a late hour, when all three adjourned to the Firefly and slept.

All matters having been arranged in regard to the shipment of the slaves—who, it should be stated, had been stolen from Whig plantations by Van Vorst and others, with the intention of selling them at the West Indies—the ranger bid farewell to his lawless associates at an early hour in the morning, took the boy up before him on his horse, and set out through the swampy forest.

Before they went, Captain Petrikin had taken the youth aside, and had hung around his neck, by a stout cord, a heavy gold ring, set with a large ruby, on which was cut as a crest a heron's wing over a cheveron.

"Dat ring, younker, was your fader's and you must keep it," said the Dutchman. "I don't want you to coom to any harm, and I got

other men are getting sick for the want of something to do. What boy is it that you brought with you?"

"That is my boy, and his name is Dick Van Vorst."

"He don't look much like you, captain," said Murphy, with a laugh.

"He is Lieutenant Dick Van Vorst, of the Coosaw Rangers, mark you, Tom Murphy, and he is my boy, and I will break the head of any man who dares to dispute it."

"I ain't the man to dispute your word, and I will make a wooden sword for the little officer."

The ranger entered Chloe's cabin, to look after the lad, and Murphy went to spread the news among his comrades.

CHAPTER III.

TWO SURPRISES.

It was nearly two months from the time when the Firefly left the coast of South Carolina, until she returned to her snug moorings in the dark lagoon on the Coosaw. The cargo of "captured" negroes had been safely landed, Petrikin and Slicker had disposed of them to good advantage, and had come back for another loading, for that was the most profitable business in which they could engage. The slaves were mostly taken from Whig or patriot estates, by marauding parties of the British or their Tory allies, and were shipped out of the reach of future claims, from Charleston and convenient points along the coast. The practice was not only winked at by the British commanders, who did not expect to be able to occupy the State much longer, but was connived at and openly engaged in by some of the officers, who amassed large amounts of money, by acting on the easy principle that to the victors belong the spoils.

Dick Van Vorst, during those two months, had become considerably changed, in appearance and in habits; he had been changed from a schoolboy to a wood-ranger, and it must be confessed that he liked his new life, for its novelty and continued adventure pleased him at first. Not having been, during his life, much in the company of his father, who was almost always absent on military duty, he did not feel the loss of that parent as keenly as some children would have felt it. He was inclined, therefore, to be tractable and obedient, especially as he knew that complaints and entreaties would be of no avail, and as he had made up his mind to submit to circumstances.

His long and curling hair had been cut, he had been dressed by old Chloe in a strong suit of homespun, and Van Vorst had given him a swamp tackey, a rough but wiry pony, of great speed and endurance, to which the boy had already become much attached. Thus attired and mounted, and armed with a sword and pistol suited to his size, he frequently rode forth with Van Vorst on his excursions, sharing his hard bed and rude fare, and was a great favorite among even the roughest and most scoundrelly of the marauders, who invariably addressed him as Lieutenant Dick.

Harry Forrest, who has been previously men-

tioned, was the commander of a band of mounted partisans, belonging to Sumter's brigade of patriots, and had been for some time on detached service in the vicinity of his father's estate, near the upper Combahee. At the time of Firefly's return to the Coosaw, he had either left the district, or was in hiding, for the most assiduous efforts of the commander of a squadron of British dragoons, aided by several of Van Vorst's men, acting as scouts, had not been able to unearth him, and it was generally supposed that he had been recalled by Sumter to his brigade.

The British, therefore, was in control of that region, and it was expected that those who had aided the patriots, and the fate of Harry Forrest's men, would be made to suffer. And yet, however, they had not been much molested, as the commander of the squadron was a more humane man than some of his predecessors had been, and did not acknowledge the justice of visiting the sins of the guilty upon the innocent.

We will accompany him to the house of Mrs. Swinton, a wealthy widow, on whose fine estate his squadron was pleasantly encamped. As he rode up to the door and dismounted, giving his bridle-rein to his servant, he was cordially greeted by Mrs. Swinton.

"Good-morning, Major Coningsby, and a hearty welcome to you," said the old lady. "It does my eyes good to see the officers of his Majesty among us again. I hope that your brave soldiers are all in good health, and that you have driven the rebels fairly out of the country."

"We are all as well as can be expected, I thank you," answered Major Coningsby, who was a fine-looking and gentlemanly officer in the prime of life. "As for the rebels, I have not been able to find any in arms against the king, and I trust that we will not be disturbed by them while I remain in this region. But what is the matter with my charming young friend, Kate?" he added, turning to the handsome and blushing girl of eighteen, who was standing near the door. "I have had no welcome from her lips, and she knows how much I miss it."

"Indeed, I am glad to see you, major, as I always am," answered Kate Swinton; "for you are so kind and clever, and not blustering and bloodthirsty like some of the officers who have deigned to make our house their home."

"Kate seems rather out of sorts," said Mrs. Swinton. "I fancy that she is not yet done grieving about her brother, Frank, who joined the rebels with Harry Forrest. Don't notice her whims, major, but come into the house and take a glass of my old wine."

"I will accept the wine with thankfulness, for a long ride has made me somewhat weary; but you must not try to prejudice me against Kate, for we could not possibly become enemies. I do not wonder that she is troubled about her brother, and I suppose that even his mother, with all her loyalty, has not been able to forget him."

"I admit that I cannot forget him," replied Mrs. Swinton, as she poured out a glass of wine. "I wish I could cease worrying about it, but the thought of his disobedience makes me so angry

that it keeps me in a perpetual ill-humor. At times I am tempted to disown him and to wish that he may lose his life before he carries his treason any further."

"I am sure that you could not be so hard-hearted, my dear Mrs. Swinton. I believe that perfect loyalty can be consistent with the claims of affection and humanity. We may deplore the error of the misguided young gentleman, but we should not judge him too harshly, for I suppose that he has acted, like many of his countrymen, according to what he believed to be the dictates of his own conscience."

"Indeed he has!" warmly exclaimed Kate. "I shall never believe that my brother Frank would willingly do wrong, and I consider that he who enlists on the weak side, although his judgment may be mistaken, is more deserving of respect than he who adheres to the strong side from motives of self-interest."

"If the disobedient boy has followed the dictates of his own conscience!" angrily rejoined the old lady. "I think it more probable that he has followed the teachings of his crony and leader in rebellion, Harry Forrest. That speech of Kate's appears to me nothing less than downright treason, but I hope you did not notice it, major. I am sometimes doubtful of the girl's loyalty, for she seldom says anything, unless it is in apology for some traitorous wretch. She used to be in love with Harry himself, and I am afraid that she is still too well affected toward him, although I have forbidden her to speak to him."

"It is strange and grievous, madam, to see such dissensions and differences of opinion in families that have so much at stake and so great an influence in the country. Young Forrest is a rank rebel, but his family, as I understand, remains true to the king. Your son has also taken up arms against his Majesty, but his mother and sister do not share in his heretical opinions."

"You are partly right and partly mistaken, Major Coningsby. Old Colonel Forrest is a true and strong loyalist, and I have no doubt that he would be fighting for the king, if he was not so old and bedridden; but his wife, silent as she is, is with the rebels at heart, and I have no doubt that Mary Forrest believes that whatever Frank Swinton does is just and holy. As for me, you know what I am, but I confess that I am not certain of Kate, and would not like to be responsible for her opinions."

"Fie, mother!" said the maligned young lady; "you need not attempt to make the major believe that I am capable of doing wrong, for he knows me too well. Here comes our luncheon, and that ought to interest him more than political discussions."

After luncheon, Major Coningsby adjourned with the ladies to the cool veranda, where their pleasant conversation was soon interrupted by a soldier, who handed him a bundle of letters and papers.

"By your leave, ladies," said the major, as he proceeded to open the letters.

"Ah!" he remarked, as he glanced over an official document, "it seems that I am destined to remain in this neighborhood for a considerable time, as I am directed to continue my

squadron in the district until I succeed in subduing the enemies of the king."

Soon he came to a letter, the very superscription of which caused him to start and open it hurriedly. He had read but a few lines, when his face became as pale as death, he crushed the paper in his hand, and sunk back in his chair, shaking as if with the palsy. Mrs. Swinton and her daughter, with alarm depicted on their countenances, sprung to his relief.

"What in the name of wonder is the matter, major?" exclaimed the old lady. "I believe he has fainted. Run for some water, Kate."

"Don't be alarmed," said the major, "for I have not fainted, and I trust that I never shall. Kate may bring me a glass of wine, for I have had a severe shock and I feel very weak."

The wine was brought, and Coningsby seemed to be restored by it, but his face was still pale, and his hand trembled as he perused the letter more carefully.

"I am afraid that you have received very unpleasant news," said Mrs. Swinton.

"Unpleasant is too mild a term; it is horrible news. My boy—my only son—has been stolen from me, and it is not likely that I will ever see him again. It would have been far better to hear of his death, than that he should fall into the hands of that man."

"What do you mean, major? How did it occur? Who has stolen your son?"

"There never lived a sweeter or dearer boy, Mrs. Swinton, and I loved him so much that I often thought of resigning my position in the army in order that I might be near him; but my pay was then almost my sole dependence, and the death of my elder brother, by which I succeeded to the estate, found me engaged in this war, and honor forbade my withdrawal until it was concluded. My boy was the very image of his sainted mother, and the honor and high spirit of a long line of Coningsbys seemed to have descended to him, and I was proud of him—too proud."

"Who has been so cruel, so heartless, as to rob you of your boy?"

"I believe that the crime has been committed by a scoundrel named Silas Warden, who was formerly a steward on my father's estate, and was discharged by him because of theft, for which he was afterward arrested and sentenced to imprisonment. On the expiration of his sentence, as he could obtain no employment, he enlisted, and when I joined the army, I found him in my regiment. I happened to detect him in an attempt to excite a mutiny. I reported him to my superiors, as my duty compelled me to do, and he was tried by court-martial and sentenced to be publicly flogged. The sentence was carried out, and he vowed vengeance against me, for my father's sake and my own. Since that time he has followed me, waiting for an opportunity, which, it seems, he has found at last. I brought my boy to the provinces with me, and when I came to Carolina I left him at the North, with the kind old woman who had been taking care of him. He was lost about three months ago, and I have just received the news. The old nurse, whose letter is blotted with tears, says that Warden had been seen in the vicinity, and that he left at about the time

when the boy disappeared. There can be no doubt that the villain has stolen my child, and he will try to make the boy, if he permits him to live, a reprobate like himself."

"Is there no clew? Can nothing be done to capture and punish the kidnapper?"

"There is no clew—not the faintest trace—and it is hardly possible, in the present unsettled condition of the country, that any pursuit can be made. The scoundrel has laid his plans adroitly, and has wounded me in the tenderest part. I will endeavor to get relieved from duty immediately, and will then return to the North and search for the boy, but I am hopeless of success."

"We shall be truly sorry to lose you, major; the more so as you have been thus terribly bereaved, and will be compelled to go on such a painful errand."

"Hark!" exclaimed Kate. "What is that disturbance without?"

Some dropping shots were heard, and then a rattling volley, accompanied by shouts, yells, and the bugles of the dragoons.

"It is an attack—a surprise, said Major Coningsby, as he snatched his sword, and rushed out to his horse.

CHAPTER IV.

A RAID OF THE RANGERS.

It was indeed a surprise, in more than one sense, that aroused Major Coningsby from his gloom and stupefaction, and sent him so quickly to the head of his squadron.

He had every reason to believe that Harry Forrest, with all his party, had retreated across the Cobiahee, and had gone to join Marion or Sumter near the upper Edisto. Nothing could be more surprising, therefore, than to find himself attacked by the young partisan, and at the head of nearly a hundred men.

The affair was but a sudden dash, the work of a moment, for Forrest had not a sufficient force to cope with the Briton, and he had only intended to surprise the camp, as he had done, and to let his friends and enemies know that he was still alive and active.

With one volley, and then with drawn sabers, he rushed through the camp, and sped away as swiftly as he had come.

As he rode by, he turned his fine face toward the house, and bowed and smiled to Kate, regardless of a bullet from Major Coningsby's pistol, while Frank Swinton, who followed him, put his hat on his sword, and waved it to his mother, who stood on the veranda, almost beside herself with amazement and indignation.

Major Coningsby soon rallied and formed his dragoons, and pursued the retreating patriots; but the poorly-fed horses of the British were no match for the better animals of their antagonists, and he hardly succeeded in getting within sight of Forrest and his party.

Leaving a portion of his command, with instructions to continue the pursuit and discover the retreat of Forrest if possible, he returned with the rest to Mrs. Swinton's house, where he was met by a messenger, with the news that an attack was expected at a point on the river where there was a depot of army stores. As he was pressingly urged to send reinforcements, he

hastily attended to his dead and wounded, said farewell to the widow and her daughter, and rode off at the head of his men toward the threatened post.

Mrs. Swinton was obliged to swallow two or three glasses of her old wine before she could recover from her astonishment sufficiently to realize the fact that her proud and powerful protectors had been, as it might fairly be said, driven away by a small band of patriots. When she found her speech she was loud in her denunciation of the wretches who could dare to insult his most sacred Majesty in the person of one of his officers and a detachment of his army.

"What a surprise it was, and what a daring act, mother!" exclaimed Kate, who was unable to suppress her admiration of the splendid manner in which the patriots charged into the camp of the dragoons. "How well and how graceful Frank looked as he dashed by the house! I would hardly have believed that I had such a brave and handsome brother. Mary Forrest may well be proud of her lover."

"And I suppose that you are equally as proud of Harry Forrest," retorted the mother. "Do you know what you are saying, child? Do you know that you are uttering treason? Your brother is a traitor, and Harry Forrest is even worse, for he led my son into rebellion. But you are right in saying, Kate, that Frank is a brave and handsome fellow. He has his father's spirit and courage, and the same grace and beauty that I admired in his father when he was young. He is a gallant boy, and it is a pity that he is not fighting for his king instead of that beggarly Congress. I hope he has not been hurt."

"I do not think he has been, mother, though I saw Major Coningsby shoot at him with his pistol."

"Did Major Coningsby shoot at my boy? I will teach him better than that, and he shall have no more of my old wine."

"Don't you think that you are growing a little disloyal, mother? You seem to forget that Frank is a rebel; besides, the major did not know who he was."

"Yes, the boy is a traitor, Kate, but I can't help loving him, and he is a gallant fellow, just like his father was. Who are those people riding up the road, my child? They look like some of the ragged rebels, but it can hardly be that they have come back here."

"They are well armed, mother, and they are very rough-looking men, but I cannot guess who they are; they have stopped, and are coming to the house."

The question was soon settled, for about fifteen of the marauding Coosaw Rangers, headed by their stalwart captain, came up to the door, and Van Vorst, without ceremony, seated himself on the veranda where the widow and her daughter had been talking.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" asked Mrs. Swinton.

"I am the commander of an humble but useful company of his Majesty's loyal subjects," answered the ranger; "a portion of them are before your eyes."

"You don't wear his Majesty's uniform, and I can not recognize you as one of his officers,"

"You must have heard of the Coosaw Rangers, as there are few in these parts who have not."

"I have heard of them, and have never heard a good word spoken of them. May God deliver his Majesty's cause from such loyalists! You, I suppose, are the ruffian who is called John Van Vorst."

"The same, at your service, with thanks for your compliment; and now I want you to order your slaves to come out here that I may inspect them."

"Why do you wish to inspect my servants?" asked the widow, who well knew the man's object, though she had not previously received a similar visitation.

"For reasons of my own, madam, as you will shortly see. I have a fine plantation in the island of Jamaica, where negroes are sorely needed, and I am compelled to ask you to loan me a few good working hands."

"If you mean to steal my servants I am unable to prevent it; but you must call them together yourself. If I had known you were coming, I would have armed them, and they would have fought you for their liberty."

"It would have been safer to hide them in the swamp, madam; but you could not have known of my coming, as I never take the trouble to inform people of my movements. I take the property to keep it from falling into the hands of your son, who is a rebel, I believe."

"If he catches you, you will soon find out what he is. As for me, I am known to be a loyalist, and as such have been assured by his Majesty's officers that I shall be protected."

"You may consider it a very convenient thing to have a two-sided family; but you can not play that game with me, my lady."

"If Major Coningsby was here, you would be punished for your insolence. He has gone but a short distance, and will soon return."

"I must laugh at you, madam, because you seem to think me so simple. I happen to know that the major was surprised here by Harry Forrest, and that he has gone to the Combahee on a wild goose chase, to meet an attack that nobody thinks of making. I have timed my movements to suit his, and I am sure that you need not expect him here before to-morrow morning."

While their leader was talking, the rangers had sought out the negroes, who had in vain attempted to escape, and to hide, and had collected a number of them in front of the door. Van Vorst selected a dozen of the most likely men, who were bound and marched off on foot, guarded by the mounted marauders.

As John Van Vorst turned to leave, he glanced at Kate Swinton, with an expression in which admiration was mingled with bitterness.

"You are much prettier than any picture could be, young lady," said he, "but you must remember that you are Frank Swinton's sister. I have an account to settle with that young rebel, and you had better tell him to leave me alone, for I know how to strike him where it will hurt."

"I do remember that I am Frank Swinton's sister," indignantly replied Kate, "and he has taught me how to defend myself against such ruffians as you, and to despise their threats."

"You had better do as I tell you, or you may look out for yourself when I come again," said Van Vorst, with a sardonic smile, as he rode away.

Mrs. Swinton gave vent to her indignation when the marauders had gone.

"I shall report the scoundrels to Major Coningsby," said she, "and he must bring them to punishment, or I will know the reason why it is not done."

"Did you notice that fine little boy who was riding with them?" asked Kate. "He was one of the prettiest fellows I have ever seen. I wonder where they got him, for it cannot be that he is the son of that villainous Van Vorst."

"I suppose they have stolen him, child. It is not possible that he really belongs to them."

Little Dick, unaware of the interest that the fair Kate had taken in him, was riding along contentedly by the side of John Van Vorst, behind the gang of slaves and their guards. He had not been allowed to alight from his pony at Mrs. Swinton's, or he would have heard the name of Major Coningsby mentioned, which might have made a change in the lives of himself and his temporary protector. He had not heard it, and did not know that he had been almost on the threshold of the house where his father had so lately been a guest. Neither could the ladies, who had but a short time before witnessed the agony of the bereaved father, know that the handsome lad who had attracted their attention was the son for whose loss he was mourning.

Van Vorst had known that Major Coningsby was in command of the British squadron, and had guessed that he was related to his young charge; but the name of the officer, when spoken by Mrs. Swinton had startled him, and had set him to thinking, so that he was quite silent and moody during the ride, until roused by the persistent questions of Dick.

"Why did you speak so cross to that beautiful lady?" inquired the boy.

"Because I wanted to frighten her, Dick, and through her to frighten her brother, who is Harry Forrest's lieutenant, and who has done me much damage."

"Do you mean to hurt her?"

"I can't be certain about that, my boy. If Frank Swinton continues to molest me, I will be revenged on him in some way."

"If you lay hands on his sister, you will make me angry, and perhaps I will shoot you!"

"Highly tighty! How bravely the young chicken crows! I shall have to be careful about what I do when you are near me, Lieutenant Dicky."

"Why did you take the old lady's slaves? What quarrel have you with her?"

"None at all. It is not her that I war with in particular, but all mankind. I took the slaves because I wanted them, not because they were hers—because I can get money by selling them."

"I thought you were fighting for King George."

"And so I am, my boy, after a fashion; but I am more for John Van Vorst than for either king or Congress. It makes little difference to me which side I am on. I would have been

with the Whigs, I suppose, if they had not treated me so badly at the beginning of the war."

"What did they do to you?"

"A party of them came to my plantation, which was many miles below here. They came in the night, and wanted me to join them. I refused, because I had not made up my mind to the right of the matter, and because I wanted to remain peaceably at home with my family. They bound me, took me out into the forest, and lashed me until I could no longer stand up. They murdered my child, a bright little girl, and my wife died of fright. Then they burned my house, carried away my slaves, and destroyed my farm, leaving me nothing but pain and remembrance. I have sworn vengeance against all the Whigs, and not one of that party is living to-day."

"They deserved to die. If they had treated me in that way, I would have hunted them down, if it had taken all my life."

"I then swore vengeance against all the Whigs, Dicky, and now it has come to this pass, that my hand is against every man except my own followers, and they only stand by me because they want to keep their necks out of halters and to get money. I could not be honest now, if I wished to, for the British officers would not let me."

Thus the man and the boy conversed, until they reached the swamp that furnished them with a home and a hiding-place.

CHAPTER V.

MALACHI IS SMITTEN.

WHEN Van Vorst returned to the island village, he sent Tom Murphy to the Coosaw, to make arrangements for the shipment of another cargo of negroes; and when Murphy came back, he was accompanied, to the surprise and disgust of his commander, by Malachi Slicker. Van Vorst received the Yankee quite ungraciously, but could not turn him away, and vented his wrath upon his subordinate.

"Why did you bring that fellow here?" he asked.

"I didn't bring him, cap'n," replied Murphy; "he just came of his own accord, and he stuck to me like a leech. I would like to know how I was to shake him off."

As there was no help for it, Van Vorst was obliged to endure the presence of the Yankee, who at once made himself officious and disagreeable, by prying into every hole and corner of the island, and asking questions of every one he met. Before he had been two hours in the camp, he had examined the contents of the cabins, and had learned the exact number of men that constituted the band, together with details concerning their arms, organization, customs, and method of operations. None of the men could have told from whom he had received his information, as all had been carefully uncommunicative; but he had picked it up, by a way of his own, and had added that much to his stock of useful knowledge to be employed if occasion should ever call for it.

Van Vorst was about to start on another expedition for the purpose of procuring negroes, and as soon as Malachi got wind of it, he deter-

mined to be one of the party. When he made known his wish to the ranger, he was met by a decided refusal; but he was not a man to be so easily rebuffed, and he stuck to his point, as Murphy had said, like a leech, so that it was impossible to shake him off.

"I just want to go along, cap'n," said he, "to see how you do the business. I don't want to steal your trade, and I guess I couldn't carry it on if I should steal it; but all kinds of knowledge are apt to be useful to a man in times like these."

"But we are going to ride, Malachi, and I don't know where to find a horse for you."

"No trouble about that, cap'n; I can find one easy enough. There's a dozen horses out yonder under cover of the trees, and that makes forty, and forty horses are more than enough for twenty-eight men, as I calculate. Besides, you ain't going to take more than half the men, and that makes it plain sailing for Malachi Slicker. I guess you are only joking, cap'n, or you don't want me to go; but you needn't try to put me off, for I am bound to be one of that party."

"I would like to know how you learned so much about my horses and my men."

"I just picked it up, by asking here and there, and by looking around."

"I must say, Malachi, without meaning any offense to you, that I wish you would attend to your own affairs, instead of trying to satisfy your curiosity about my camp. If you will go, I suppose you must, though I had much rather you wouldn't, and would rather you had stayed on board the Firefly."

"Don't get huffy, cap'n, and don't go against your own interests, for that is the most foolish thing a man can do. I am a good friend of yours, cap'n, as you will see if I have a chance to prove it, and I may give you a few notions that may be worth money to you."

When Van Vorst set out on his slave-hunting expedition, Malachi Slicker made himself one of the party, and he insisted on riding at the front, in the company of the ranger and Dick, thus effectually putting a bar upon the unrestrained conversation in which they were wont to indulge.

In due time the marauding party arrived at its destination, which proved to be the estate of Colonel Forrest, the father of the young partisan leader. Van Vorst knew that Harry Forrest had again crossed the Combahee, or gone into hiding, and he had so timed his movement that he had no fear of being molested by Major Coningsby and his squadron.

He found the coast clear and quiet, and was received with manifest disgust and dismay by the old colonel, his wife, and their dark-eyed daughter Mary. Here, as he had done at Mrs. Swinton's, he ordered the slaves to be paraded before him, so that he might choose such as would suit his purpose, and here, also, he was told to get them himself if he wanted them. His followers were set at work to bring them in, but they were not as successful as they had been on the previous raid, for most of the negroes had anticipated them by running away and hiding themselves in a swamp that lay about half a mile from the house. A few old women, children and other stragglers, were got together, from

whom the ranger could only select three that he considered worth taking away. He was naturally indignant at this poor result; said that he had been defrauded of his rights, and vowed that he would make good his loss in a summary manner.

This he proceeded to do, by relieving the household of their money, jewels, watches, and other portable valuables, during which operation he was followed by the curses of old Colonel Forrest, and the taunts and threats of his wife and daughter, who promised the unscrupulous marauder that the vengeance of both the British and the patriots should be visited upon him. When he had finished his work of plunder, he gave Mary Forrest a similar warning to that which Kate Swinton had received, and rode off with his followers and the stolen negroes.

Mrs. Forrest and her daughter watched them from the veranda, while the old colonel, almost crazy with impotent rage, lay on his couch.

"We have lost much, my dear," said Mrs. Forrest, "but it might have been more, and we should be thankful that we are no worse off. If Harry had been here, with a few of his brave horsemen, how he would have scattered those rascally thieves!"

"He would have made them fly before him like sheep, as he drove the red-coats at Mrs. Swinton's. What a gallant affair that was, mother! The whole district is ringing with the brilliancy and bravery of the exploit. If he cannot recover for us what we have lost, he will, at least, punish the ruffianly robbers as soon as he can lay hands upon them."

"You appear to believe that your brother and Frank Swinton can accomplish anything they choose to undertake; but you should not be too sanguine. They hardly dare to venture into the neighborhood now, as the district is overawed by the much heavier force of the British and Tories. It is a wonder that they succeeded so well in that daring surprise at Mrs. Swinton's, and they will not be likely to make another attempt against such odds. While they are gone, we are at the mercy of such villains as Van Vorst, for he feels sure that the patriots cannot punish him, and the British are either unable or unwilling to find him and put a stop to his outrages."

"We are in a sad enough condition now, but I feel confident that all will be clear in the end, that the cause of liberty will triumph, and that we shall be again secure in our homes."

"Van Vorst looked so wicked and cruel when he threatened you, my dear, that I am sure he meant what he said, and I am afraid he will do you a damage."

"He looks like a man who is capable of committing any crime, but I have no fear of him, and I shall not repeat his threats to Harry or Frank. Did you observe that handsome boy who was with the gang, mother?"

"I did, and I wondered how such a fine little lad happened to be in such bad company. It cannot be that he belongs to Van Vorst or any of his party."

"He seemed like a young eagle among buzzards. I wished that he would alight from his pony and come into the house, for I wanted to kiss him and talk to him."

"Your father is calling you, Mary. I suppose he wants his hot posset."

While the marauding party were at Colonel Forrest's residence, Malachi Slicker had kept his eyes fastened on Mary Forrest. He was attracted by her beauty as soon as he saw her, and he suddenly experienced a new emotion. His cold and calculating nature was warmed up; until he almost forgot, for the moment, his selfishness and his money-getting plans. He had seen "pretty girls" in Connecticut, but he had never met so radiantly beautiful a creature as the dark-eyed Southerner. If she could only be his, if he could possess her as his own, he felt that he would be willing to forego all his other possessions and hopes.

During the ride back to the swamp retreat, he was unusually silent. He not only refrained from obtruding his impertinent remarks and inquisitive questions upon his companions, but he seemed so entirely wrapped up in his own thoughts, that Van Vorst and Dick noticed it and wondered at it. The truth was, that he was thinking of Mary Forrest, and endeavoring to form a plan by which he could get her into his possession. If he could only make Mary Forrest his, no matter by what means, he thought that he could trust to the chances of the future for succeeding to her father's fine estate. As her only brother was a rebel, in arms against the king, continually exposed to danger, and liable to be killed at any time, Malachi "calculated" that his prospect of owning the plantation, in the event of marrying the young lady, was a fair one.

The more he meditated on the subject, the more strongly he was convinced that the only hope of effecting his purpose lay in securing the services of John Van Vorst, and he resolved to contract an alliance with the veteran marauder. When he had come to this conclusion, he was not long in forming a plan for carrying out his intention.

CHAPTER VI.

PLOTTING AND ACTING.

THE Yankee kept his purpose and his tongue to himself until he returned to the camp on the island, when he called Van Vorst aside, after supper, and proceeded to develop the new phase of his rascality.

"I say, cap'n," he commenced, "that is an almighty pretty gal at the house we went to to-day."

"If you mean Mary Forrest, I suppose there is not a more handsome woman in these parts, and that is not saying a little."

"You seemed to have something of a spite against her, to judge from the way you spoke to her."

"Not against her, Malachi, but against her brother, Harry Forrest, who is the leader of a troop of patriots, as they call themselves, and who appears to like nothing better than the sport of hunting me down like a dog. He has spoiled some of my best plans, he has shot or hung some of my most useful men, and I have sworn vengeance against him, but have had no good chance to work my will on the pest. If he pursues me any more—if he troubles me as he has done, I have made up my mind to strike him through

his sister, and that is what I gave the girl to understand."

"I've taken a fancy to that gal, cap'n, and I want to have her for my own. I think I would like to make her Mistress Slicker, and I wouldn't have any objection to a sheer in her old father's property."

"It is certain that Satan couldn't surpass you in impudence," said Van Vorst, with a contemptuous laugh. "If you suppose that Mary Forrest would consent to take you for a husband, you must have a better opinion of yourself than anybody else has."

"I said nothing about her consent, cap'n, and I ain't talking about likes and dislikes. I know that I'm not as good-looking as some folks, but a cat may look at a king, and the prettiest men don't always get the prettiest wives. My mind is so set on that gal that I mean to have her if it is possible; and I have got something to propose to you that is likely to suit us both very well."

"Let me hear it; I am ready to listen," said the ranger, whose curiosity was excited by the confident manner of the calculating Yankee.

"You know well enough, cap'n," continued Malachi, "that Harry Forrest ain't going to leave you alone; that he will hunt you down whenever he can get a chance, and that he is sure to hang you if he catches you. Do you suppose that the gal will tell him what you said to her, or that it would scare him if she should tell him? Now, really, cap'n, what do you think?"

"I suppose you are right, Malachi."

"What is the use of waiting, then? Why do you want him to hit you again, and perhaps knock you down, before you strike back?"

"There's no use, Malachi; but I don't really know whether I was altogether in earnest in what I said to the girl. I only wanted to give her a scare."

"And you didn't succeed. That might anger a man a little. Suppose you hit at once, and hit hard, by taking the girl and carrying her off."

"Then, I suppose, you would want me to give her to you. I don't see how that would pay me, as all the risk would be mine, and all the profit would be yours."

"Suppose I could make it well worth your while. Suppose you could satisfy your spite against Harry Forrest, and make yourself rich, and help me at the same time. What do you think of that, cap'n?"

"That is quite another thing, and I am ready to help in any plan that promises plenty of money."

"I guess you ain't very particular how the money is to be got, if there is plenty of it."

"Not I; all men are my game, and their money is what I want."

"If I show you how to get the gold and silver, and help you to get it, will you promise to put the gal into my hands?"

"I will—I swear it," answered the ranger, who had an inkling of what Malachi wanted to propose, and was ready to join him, if his plan proved to be a feasible one.

"Now we understand each other. I told you I was a friend of yours, cap'n, and that I might make you a rich man. I said so because I was thinking of this very plan, and making ready to

propose it to you. You know that Jants Petrikin and I own the Firefly in partnership. I own one-third of the vessel, and the Dutchman owns the other two-thirds. I am entitled to one-third of the profits, and he is entitled to the other two-thirds. Those profits have been big, Cap'n Van Vorst, and they are all on board of the schooner—my share and the Dutchman's—locked up in a strong box. I ain't going to say how much there is, but it is a big load of gold and silver, and not a bad piece among them. What is to hinder us from putting that stupid Petrikin out of the way, and taking the stuff to ourselves? I guess you have done harder jobs than that."

"It seems easy enough, but if my men help me, I will have to divide with them."

"We don't need their help. We two are enough to manage the lazy Dutchman, especially as he would never think of suspecting us."

"How would we manage the crew?"

"No trouble about that. I will agree to take care of them. They don't care for Petrikin more than they care for me, but they will follow whoever pays them best. I will carry the gal away on the schooner, and I will warrant that they will go with me without asking any questions."

"You intend, then, to keep the Firefly for yourself?"

"Of course; she would be of no use to you, and I mean to give you half my share of the profits."

"And take half of the Dutchman's share. It seems to me, Malachi, that you will be getting the best of the bargain, for you are to have half the money, the schooner, the girl, and perhaps a plantation hereafter, while I am to get only half the money."

"But don't you see that I put in my sheer of the profits? There's your spite, too, cap'n—that's something."

"Yes; that is something; but the money is more. I agree to the plan, Malachi, and we will go to work, if you wish, as soon as we can. I will lie in wait for the young woman, and you must make all the arrangements for securing Petrikin and the schooner."

"I'll do it, cap'n, and the sooner we both commence the better. Jest let me know when you are ready, and I will go with you to get the gal. Two heads are always better than one, you know."

"Not in this matter, Malachi," replied the ranger. "I must manage the affair myself, and you would not only be in danger, but in the way. You attend to Petrikin and the schooner, and I will do my part of the business in my own way."

Van Vorst was so peremptory on this point, that the Yankee was obliged to submit, and to wait as patiently as he could, until the capture of Mary Forrest should be effected.

The capture was not so very easy a task as Malachi supposed it to be, but was one that required skill and caution. It would have been easy enough for the ranger to swoop down upon Colonel Forrest's house with his band of marauders, and carry off his prey by force; but, though he was willing that Harry Forrest and Swinton should know or suspect his agency in the outrage, he did not wish to act so openly

that the British commander would be forced to condemn the crime, and bring the perpetrators to punishment.

He took with him Tom Murphy, Brown Sam, whose rough handling by Forrest's men, from whom he had barely escaped with his life, had increased his hatred of their leader, and another ruffian, with whom he haunted the vicinity of Colonel Forrest's residence, watching for an opportunity to seize the daughter of the bedridden old loyalist.

After three days of patient waiting and lurking, Van Vorst found the opportunity that he was seeking—and something more.

He not only saw Mary Forrest walking in a grove at some distance from her father's house, but perceived that she was accompanied by Kate Swinton.

Here was a chance that the unscrupulous ranger was not likely to overlook—a chance to smite both the partisan leaders with one blow, and his resolution was immediately formed and carried into effect.

Creeping up with his followers, under cover of the trees, he sprung upon the unsuspecting girls, who were seized and brutally bound and gagged before they could utter a cry, and were then hurried to a dense part of the forest, where the ranger concealed them until nightfall.

As soon as his movements were covered by the darkness of the night, he caused the captured young ladies to be placed on horses, and traveled through by-roads and forest paths to the village in the swamp, where they were placed in a cabin, and left in charge of Tom Murphy.

CHAPTER VII.

SAD NEWS.

THE swamps and morasses were the fortresses of the men who followed Marion and Sumter, and the other partisan leaders who upheld, under so many difficulties and discouragements, the cause of the patriots in South Carolina. Of immense extent, and trackless except by those who were thoroughly acquainted with their devious and dangerous labyrinths, the swamps were well fitted for purposes of concealment or defense.

In one of these natural fastnesses was the rendezvous and hiding-place of Harry Forrest and his troop of patriot horsemen. They had other retreats, to which they resorted for temporary rest, or when they were hard pressed by the enemy, but this was their regular camp and point of refuge, where their expeditions were organized, and where their supplies, such as they were, were collected.

There was but one route by which their concealment could be reached, and that was only known to themselves and a few trusty friends, never having been discovered even by the keen eyes of John Van Vorst and his followers. The path, if it could be called a path, traversed the swampy forest where every step was perilous, except to those who trod the way with practiced feet. After winding through an intricate labyrinth, it was abruptly terminated by a lake of deep and sluggish water, which could only be crossed by means of a rude flat-boat that was kept on the opposite side. After crossing this lake, and pushing through a sort of

hedge of brush and tangled vines, the land was found to be higher and quite dry, covered with a splendid growth of spreading oaks, and carpeted with an abundance of rich grass.

Under the shade of the great trees were rude huts, formed of logs and branches, and around them were scattered, one cool evening, a number of wild-looking men, in coarse and motley attire, seeming more like a collection of ragamuffins than a party of soldiers. Muskets and carbines were leaning against the trunks of trees, and sabers, saddles, and other accouterments hung from the limbs. A few horses were tethered here and there, and others were grazing at their ease near the encampment.

Two young men were seated upon a log, at a little distance from the huts, conversing together. The eldest and tallest of the two was Harry Forrest, the leader of the band, with dark hair and flashing black eyes. The other was Frank Swinton, his lieutenant, with light complexion, merry face, and a very wide-awake expression. Both made some pretensions to style in their dress, their brown homespun having a military cut, and a few adornments that were intended to distinguish them from their followers.

"What is to be done next, my brave but lazy captain?" asked Swinton. "Are we to remain here in idleness, and eat and drink and smoke and sleep our lives away, while we should be striking stout blows for our country? We have now been here four or five days, I think, and in all that long time we have not stepped beyond the limits of the swamp. The enemy must think that we have been frightened out of the country."

"I wish they did think so, but I am afraid they know us too well for that," answered Forrest. "Have you forgotten the surprise we gave them at your mother's?"

"That was very well done—a brilliant affair; but what did we gain by it? Of what use was it to the cause? We killed and wounded a few dragoons, and beat up their quarters in handsome style, but we put them on the alert at the same time. They will keep a better watch hereafter to prevent such surprises."

"We wished our friends to know that we had not been killed or frightened out of the country."

"The attack was for the benefit of our friends, then—especially of my sister Kate, I suppose. I'll warrant that it was not pleasing to my Tory mother, as half of the dragoons followed us, and the other half were drawn off to the Combahee, leaving a fine chance for John Van Vorst to slip in and carry off a dozen or more of her servants."

"That was one of the chances of war to which she would have been equally liable at any other time. We must hunt for that scoundrel, again, Frank, for I am inclined to think that he has some place on the coast, or up the Coosaw, from which he ships the negroes that he steals. It is certain that he does not take them to Charleston, and I have heard rumors of a suspicious-looking vessel having been seen above the mouth of the river."

"Set me on his track, my dear captain, and I promise you that I will not grumble any

more. He does more damage to the cause than a whole squadron of British regulars. I am afraid that he may try to carry out the threats he made to my sister and to yours, for he hates us, as he has good reason to, and he will scruple at nothing, to be revenged upon us."

"There is no telling what he may do, and we must guard against him as well as we can. He is mean enough to try to carry out any threats he may make, and he is not in the habit of saying anything he does not mean. But, as I understood from my mother, his threat against Mary was only to be carried out if we should molest him again. We had better molest him as soon as we can find him, and do the work so thoroughly that he will not be able to complain of us again."

"I agree with you entirely, my gallant commander. Our first duty is to find him, for it is a truth that we must catch our fish before we can eat it. Set me on the track, as I have asked you to do, and I will not rest until I have run the fox to earth. But what have we here? It is one of your sable satellites, Forrest, and he seems to be in trouble."

As Harry Forrest rose and looked in the direction pointed out, a negro man approached, accompanied by one of their soldiers. He was moaning, lamenting, and wringing his hands, and he burst into tears when he reached the place where Forrest was standing.

"What is the matter, Julius?" asked the captain.

"Dey's gone, Mars'r Harry; dey's gone!" sobbed the negro.

"Who are gone? Stop your whining and crying, and tell me plainly what is the matter."

"Dey's bofe gone, Mars'r Harry, and Mars'r Swinton, too; dey's done kerried away!"

"Do you mean that my mother and my sister have been carried away? Speak, you dumb beast!"

"Not quite so bad as dat, Mars'r Harry, but bad enough. Missy Mary done gone, and Missy Kate Swinton done gone wid her."

"Where have they gone? What has happened to them? Tell me quickly."

"Tell it all jest as well as I ken, Mars'r Harry. Missy Kate Swinton come ober to see Missy Mary, and dat rascal Cato come along to take car' ob her—jest as if dat lazy, good-fur-nuffin' t'ievin' Cato could take car' ob anybody, when he can't take car' ob heself."

"Never mind about Cato. Tell us what has happened."

"De young ladies was togedder at de house, and dat Cato was dar' too, loafin' round and tryin' to git a chance to steal somefin', I 'spect, and I tole um not fur go 'way from de house, and dey did go 'way from de house, while dat Cato was sleepin' arter he stuff heself full, and dey went out into de woods, and we nebber see um no more, and it's all de fault of dat mizzable lazy Cato."

"When were they lost? Did you search for them?"

"Yes'day dey was gone. I roused up all de folks lass night and dis mornin', and we couldn't find nuffin' ob 'em though we looked all troo de woods and eberywhar. Den I find one place

'mong de trees whar dey's been a fuss, and I picked up a piece ob rope and a piece ob ribbon, and I foller de tracks to whar dey stop a while, and I see dey's been t'ree men dar wid de young ladies. At dat place dey git on hosses and ride off, and I foller de trail till I can't see nuffin', and den I come to tell you all 'bout it, and it's my solemn 'pinion—dat dat Cato needs a floggin'."

The two young gentlemen looked at each other, their glances expressing their anger and determination.

"It is Van Vorst's work!" they both exclaimed.

"The villain has been beforehand with us," said Forrest. "We have no time for sorrow, no time to waste in laying plans. We must find the trail of the rascals, and hunt them to their holes. Tell Benny Lox that I want to see him immediately."

The soldier darted off to obey this order, and in a short time the individual who had been sent for made his appearance.

Benny Lox was a small but wiry young man, with keen little black eyes and bushy eyebrows, but with a countenance that was generally stolid and inexpressive. He had Indian blood in his veins, to the possession of which his peculiar characteristics were partly due, for he was considered the best scout in the command, the most valuable man for finding and following a trail.

The captain quickly explained to him what had happened and what was wanted of him, and suggested that he should accompany the negro, who could show him the trail of the abductors, so that he could take it up where Julius had left it.

Benny seemed willing enough to perform this duty, for his eyes flashed, and he shook his fist at some imaginary foe.

"I'll find 'em," he muttered, as he beckoned to the negro, and hurried away without another word, and apparently without any preparation.

Much as they trusted in the skill and daring of Benny Lox, the young gentlemen were not willing to rely upon him alone, but proceeded to use every means they could think of to effect the rescue of their sisters. Scouts were sent out in different directions, and Frank Swinton set off in the morning, with one companion, to explore the region about the Coosaw. All were directed to report as soon as possible to the captain, who remained at the camp to prepare his men to start as soon as he should receive any information of Van Vorst's hiding-place.

CHAPTER VIII.

A SUITOR NONSUITED.

MALACHI SLICKER, impatiently waiting for news of Van Vorst's success in his attempt to capture Mary Forrest, had done nothing toward the performance of his part of the contract. He had been to the Firefly, it is true, and he knew that she was still moored in the lagoon, where Jants Petrikin was smoking his pipe, abusing the weather, and watching the few negroes that had been sent to him. He knew that the Firefly and her captain would remain where they were as long as there was a prospect of adding to their cargo, and that his part of the plan might be

carried out at any time. He determined, therefore, that he would make no movement until he saw how Van Vorst succeeded.

He was both rejoiced and surprised when the ranger returned from his expedition with Mary Forrest and Kate Swinton, and he went to him for the purpose of obtaining an interview with Mary and asking the marauder why he had gone further than the plan that had been agreed upon between them.

"Guess you've made out a little better than you calculated on, cap'n," said he, grinning and rubbing his hands as he seated himself by Van Vorst. "It ain't everybody who goes out after a bird and comes back with a brace of 'em. Who's t'other bird, cap'n, and what are you going to do with her?"

"That's nobody's business but mine, Malachi, though I don't mind telling you, as we are sharers in this matter, and as we expect to work together. She is the sister of Frank Swinton, that infernal Harry Forrest's lieutenant, and I owe him about as much spite as I owe the other. I found the two girls together in the wood, and as I couldn't take one without the other knew it, I concluded that it would be a good thing to grab them both, and so work out a double spite."

"Mighty nice for you, cap'n. You ought to be obliged to me for starting you out and putting you on the track of them. What do you calculate to do with t'other one?"

"I haven't exactly made up my mind, Malachi. I have been thinking, though, since it has happened as it has, that I may take a fancy to a wife myself, and Kate Swinton is pretty enough to please any young man, much more an old and ugly chap like me. That would hurt Harry Forrest worse than anything else, I reckon, for I know that he means to marry Miss Swinton as soon as the country gets settled down. I may as well say to you, as we are partners now, that I've a notion of quitting this region, for there's a feeling in my bones that it may be getting too hot for me before long. I have a little money and other things laid up, and that, along with my share of the gold and silver in the strong-box, and my share of the schooner when we sell her, will make enough to keep me in good style for the rest of my life. After we put Petrikin out of the way, and get the vessel in our hands, we can go where we choose, and take the women with us. For my part, I only want to get to some country where I'm not known, and where nothing that has passed here can be brought up against me. I haven't exactly made up my mind to do it, as I told you, but that is my notion just now."

The Yankee listened to this explanation, which was a long speech for John Van Vorst to make, with considerable uneasiness and misgiving. He had thought to take the ranger into partnership as far as his own purposes might be forwarded by the arrangement, but had no idea of such an intimate union between them. He felt that he would not be free to do as he pleased on the schooner, or to take her where he chose to. Worse than all, he saw that his new partner meant to claim half the value of the vessel, thus reducing very considerably the share of the joint plunder that he expected to have. He was perfectly willing to give Van Vorst half the money,

but did not relish the idea of giving him more than he himself would gain by the villainy.

Distasteful as the ranger's proposition was to him, however, he made no objection to it, but concealed his feelings, for he knew that his valuable friend could be a formidable opponent, and he wanted to think about this new phase of the business before making any definite reply.

"Calculate you're pretty well satisfied with the speculation, cap'n," said he. "It ain't often you find two such handsome birds on the same limb. Where have you stowed away my gal? If there's no objection to it, I would like to take a look at her."

"They are both locked up in one of the cabins," answered Van Vorst. "What have you done toward your part of the business? Have you made the arrangements for taking the vessel and putting the Dutchman out of the way?"

"That will be all right, cap'n. There is scarcely any arrangement needed, and the work can be done at any time. Which cabin is my gal in?—or are they locked up together?"

"They are safe, I tell you, and I want to know about what you undertook to do. The work must not be delayed, for there is no time to lose. I feel uneasy, somehow, about staying in this neighborhood any longer, and the sooner I get away from here, I reckon, the better for me."

"So you have really concluded to go with me and the Firefly," thought the Yankee. "I shall have a word to say about that, and the word won't be yes, if I can help it." But he was careful not to express his thoughts in words.

"You needn't tell me that there are no arrangements to be made," continued the ranger. "There was never anything done properly that wasn't well planned beforehand. Our arrangements must be made safe and sure, so that there can be no chance of failure, for there's no telling how furious Forrest and Swinton will be when they hear of this thing. They will scour the country far and near, and will turn every stone and look in every bush, if the red-coats will let them. That business ought to have been done before this, Malachi, and now it must be attended to without loss of time."

"Guess you're right, cap'n, and I will look after it right away. It can be done at any minute, as I told you before; just let me take a look at my gal, and have a talk to her, and then I'll be off to the schooner."

"You may see her, Malachi, if you will keep your word; but you must understand that I will have no dodging or underhand work. It isn't safe to play such games with me. They are both in the same room, and I reckon you wouldn't care to see them together."

"One at a time is enough; two is company, but three is none," answered the Yankee, forcing a laugh. "I just want to let the gal know what my prospects are, and what a good husband I mean to make her, and to see how she feels about it."

"I will have them separated, and will tell Tom Murphy to let you in. I reckon, Malachi, that you had better not be in too much of a hurry with your love-making, for the young woman won't take kindly to it, but will be apt to say something that may hurt your feelings."

"As I ain't very tender-skinned, cap'n; there's no fear of my getting r'iled. It will be the best for the gal to get used to seeing my face, as she will be obliged to look at it after awhile."

Although the Yankee knew that he was not handsome, and that he could not possibly be made so, he did not omit to beautify his person to as great an extent as the scanty conveniences of the little village would allow. In fact, he had in anticipation of such an occasion, brought from the schooner his best apparel, which, although not of the finest quality, or cut in the latest style, would make quite an impression he thought, in such a rude country as the province of Carolina. Accordingly, it was in the full glory of blue cutaway coat, long plaid waistcoat, bluff small-clothes, three-cornered hat of beaver, and well-soaped face and locks, that he presented himself at the door of the cabin in which Mary Forrest was imprisoned. Tom Murphy envied him as he lit him into the cabin, and secretly coveted every article of his dress.

With as much dignity as he could assume, and with his blandest simper, which was an execrable attempt at a smile, the Yankee entered a small room, the floor of which was formed of hewn logs, and the sides of logs in the rough. It had no furniture except a rude bedstead covered with blankets, two stools, and a rickety box with a basin of water on it. The room was very scantily lighted, and Malachi left the door open, in order to give full effect to his attire, and to enable him to feast his eyes on the beauty of the young lady.

Mary Forrest, with her face buried in her hands, sat on the little low bedstead, and appeared to have been weeping. She raised her head when the Yankee entered, and shot at him a defiant and inquiring glance.

"What do you wish?" she asked. "It cannot be possible that you have come to release me? Is it not enough that I am held as a prisoner, without being subjected to the intrusion of the wretches who have made me a captive?"

"It is I who am the captive, fairest of earthly beauties," replied Malachi, throwing himself into an attitude, and expanding his simper to a grin. "I, Malachi Slicker, merchant and gentleman of prospects, from the goodly province or State of Connecticut, have been struck down, disarmed, bound and carried away captive, by the gleaming arrows that flash from thy transcendent eyes, loveliest of thy sex!"

"What do you mean by that nonsense?"

"It is not nonsense, but the transcendent sublimity of truth. I love thee, most beautiful and fairylike creature, and desire to make thee mine. Upon my knees I swear—"

What Malachi would have sworn must remain unuttered, for he wisely concluded that his small-clothes were too tight to allow him to assume a kneeling posture, and he refrained from making the effort.

"What do you mean? Are you crazy?" asked Mary Forrest, who could not repress a smile at the grotesque appearance and grandiloquent speeches of her visitor.

"If I am crazy, divinest of thy sex, it is thy incomparable beauty that has made me so. The fact is, young lady that I love you, and I offer you, instead of the solitude of this dun-

geon—if it may be so called—the position—the enviable position—of my wife. As Mistress Malachi Slicker, you will be—"

"Don't say that again!" exclaimed Mary, as she advanced toward the Yankee, her glowing cheeks expressing her disgust and indignation. "I am the daughter of a soldier, and I am not to be insulted with impunity by every conceited rascal who chooses to dress himself in stolen clothes. Your wife, indeed! When eagles mate with fish-hawks, you may speak that word."

As the young lady advanced, Malachi fell back in evident trepidation, but he soon recovered his courage, and his simpering grin changed to an expression of malignant ferocity that made him look uglier than ever.

"We shall see, young woman!" he muttered, as he shook his long bony finger in her face. "You may be as lofty as you like, but you shall be brought down and made to beg at my feet. You are in my power, and I calculate there is no way for you to get loose, until I put you on a ship and carry you across the sea. Whether you are willing or not, you shall be my wife, and you had better make up your mind to it."

"Your wife!" ejaculated Mary, in a tone of contempt. "I tell you, you conceited brute, you base-minded thing, I am affianced to a gallant gentleman, whose name, even, is too sacred to be spoken before such scum as you, and I would wed the grave rather than prove false to him in a single thought. Leave this room, you cowardly popinjay, or I will call your master."

Malachi was about to reply more fiercely than before and would have attempted, perhaps to use personal violence; but Tom Murphy, whose attention had been attracted by the loud talking, entered the cabin, and restrained him.

"This won't do, mister," said the henchman. "Fightin' or quarrelin' is ag'inst the cap'n's orders, and I must shut up the shop. P'raps the folks will be more glad to see you when you call ag'in, mister."

The Yankee made no objection to being sent away so unceremoniously, and Mary Forrest, relieved from his odious presence, was again locked up with her own sad reflections.

CHAPTER IX.

A GNAWING MOUSE.

WHEN Mary Forrest and Kate Swinton arrived at the place where the captors waited for the night, the bandages were removed from their eyes and mouths, and they were permitted to see and speak. They at once perceived that they were in the power of the hated and dreaded refugee, John Van Vorst.

Kate trembled and turned pale as she looked at his rugged and relentless visage, and shrunk closer to the side of her friend, on whose courage and strength of mind she was accustomed to rely. Mary Forrest, however, stood up boldly and defiantly before the wretches, and demanded to know why she had been so rudely torn from her home. As she knew well that remonstrances and supplications would be of no avail, she did not condescend to use them, but gave Van Vorst and his fellows what she would have called a piece of her mind, speaking her thoughts so plainly that they could not be misunderstood.

As her words only provoked the scoffs and jeers of her captors, she ceased her upbraiding, and submitted to her fate in silence.

When the young ladies were placed on horseback, and were escorted through by-roads and forest paths, they were still permitted to see and to speak to each other, although they were cautioned not to make the free use of their tongues, but they seldom availed themselves of the privilege of conversation. A close watch was kept upon them, to prevent them from leaving any trace or token by which they might be followed, and in this manner they traveled, silently and rapidly, until they reached the swamp in which Van Vorst's little village was situated.

On finding themselves alone in the cabin, where they were left together, they gave vent to their long-restrained emotion. Kate Swinton fell into the arms of her friend, and wept bitterly. Although she had defied Van Vorst boldly enough at her home, when she regarded his threats merely as idle vamping, she was now completely unnerved and broken down by the terrible reality.

"We are in the power of that horrid ruffian, Van Vorst," said Kate. "I defied him when he threatened me, but I did not think it would come to this. What a cruel and heartless scoundrel he must be, to wish to torture us because he hates our brother! What shall we do, Mary? What will become of us? How can you be so calm and quiet? For my part, I can do nothing but cry."

"I remember, Kate, that I am to be the wife of Frank Swinton, and I will not prove myself unworthy of his love by a cowardly yielding to grief and fear. He is as brave as a lion, and I wish to be like him. You are more soft-hearted than I am, my darling, but you must pick up spirit, for I fear that we will need all our strength and courage before we are free from this man."

"Will we ever be free, Mary? What will happen to us? How can we help ourselves?"

"It is beyond my power to tell you, my poor girl. If Harry Forrest knew of what trouble we are in, he would rescue us immediately."

"If your brother and mine knew our situation, they would not lose a moment in attempting to aid us. As soon as they learn that we have been taken away, they will do their best; but they will need to find us before they can save us, and we should not depend too much upon their skill and strength. We must put our trust in God, Kate, and must pray to Him, for He alone can soften the hearts of our jailers, or send our friends to our deliverance."

In the course of the morning, Tom Murphy brought them some coarse food, of which they partook sparingly, for their grief was far greater than their hunger. Then he removed Kate Swinton into the other room of the cabin, leaving Mary alone, and refusing to explain his motive in so doing. After Malachi Slicker had gone away discomfited, he again allowed them to come together, and locked them up in the same room.

"What does it mean?" asked Kate, when she was again folded in the arms of her friend. "Why have we been separated? What has happened to you?"

"Nothing very terrible, my dear. I have been more fortunate than you, I suppose, for I have had company."

"I heard loud talking, and thought that I distinguished the sound of your voice, but I was not certain. Who was your visitor?"

"A creature who called himself Malachi Slicker. He was an ugly and grotesque animal, dressed in the most outrageous attempt at style, and his impudent assumption was only matched by his ignorance. I saw him in the company of Van Vorst when that wretch came to steal our slaves, and I noticed that he kept his eyes fixed upon me in a very insolent manner. I did not rebuke him at that time as I wished to, because I thought it best not to provoke any of them; but I have paid him for all now, as far as I am able to do so with my tongue."

"I will warrant that he got no gentle words from you. What was the object of this gallant's intrusion?"

"He came to offer me his hand. I suppose he would have offered me his heart also, if he had a heart to offer. As well as I could learn, from his big words and his absurd attitudes, he wished me to be his wife."

"The wretch! What reply did you make to such an offer?"

"There was but one to be made. Take the bitterest and most scornful words that you can conceive of, and imagine that I said them. If I did not, I meant to. I have learned one thing, I think—that it is not only to serve the purposes of Van Vorst's spite that we have been brought here. That ugly beast who was here awhile ago has been smitten with an intense admiration of my charms, and the chief of the marauders upholds him in his outrageous conduct, or he would not have been allowed to see me and make his audacious proposition. I cannot imagine what they intend to do with you, my darling, but it is plain that they have agreed upon their plans as far as I am concerned. Whatever they may attempt to do, Kate, you must remember that you are the sister of Frank Swinton, and must meet them boldly and defiantly, for their hearts can never be turned by prayers and entreaties."

"What is that, Mary? Did you hear it?"

There was a slight noise, as if of scratching against the logs of the cabin on the outside.

"It is a rat or a mouse," suggested Mary.

The sound changed, and they heard a voice—low and plaintive tones, like those of a child.

"It is a human voice, Mary. Some one is calling us."

"Hush! It may be friends; we must be careful how we answer."

The voice was that of little Dick—of Van Vorst's *protege*—and it is necessary to explain how he happened to be there and to be speaking to the fair prisoners.

He had partly overheard the conversation between the ranger and the Yankee, when they were plotting to capture Mary Forrest and to get possession of the treasure on the Firefly. Although the boy had no affection for Jants Petrikin, he had a still poorer opinion of Malachi Slicker, and could not wish him any good-fortune, but he was not disposed to object to a plan by which his protector was to benefit. His

sympathy was not excited for Mary Forrest as it had been for Kate Swinton, who had strongly attracted his boyish admiration. Much as he would have disliked to see her become the property of the Yankee, it was no occasion for his interference, especially as he had his doubts as to whether Van Vorst intended to carry out the plan in good faith.

When the ranger went on an expedition with two companions, refusing to allow Dick to accompany him, the boy guessed where and for what they had gone, and he awaited their return with considerable curiosity.

Dick's eyes were wide open when the two young ladies were brought into the camp, and he was agitated by an emotion very different from that of curiosity, as he recognized the sunny hair and clear complexion of Kate Swinton. They were hurried away into the cabin so quickly that he had no opportunity of speaking to them, but he improved his time by watching Van Vorst and the Yankee, and placed himself in such a position that he was able to hear all that they said concerning the two captives.

The revelations that were then made filled him with such indignation and pity that he resolved to become the champion of the two girls, and to aid them if possible.

He saw Malachi Slicker, dressed up like a popinjay, enter the cabin, and watched the door until he came out. Then he went around to the rear of the rude building, where the tall trees and the thick bushes afforded concealment, and dug away the mud "chinking" between two of the logs, until he could look into the darkened room and partly see the forms of the two fair captives. He attracted their attention by scratching against the wood, and then spoke to them in a low and cautious tone.

"Come to the wall. I want to speak to you. I am a friend."

The faces of the girls became brighter, as they stepped toward the light that shone through the chink, and knelt down by the wall.

"Is it possible," asked Mary, "that we have a friend in this horrible place? Tell us who you are, and why you are our friend?"

"Are you the pretty lady with the long light hair and the bright blue eyes?"

"It is I who have the blue eyes," answered Kate. "This is my friend."

"I saw you at your house when we went to take the black men, and I want to help you, for you look as pretty as my mother's picture. I told Captain Van Vorst that he had better not try to hurt you, or I might get angry and shoot him, and now when he wants to take you away in a ship and make you his wife, I mean that he sha'n't do it."

"His wife!" exclaimed Kate. "Is that the fate which he has reserved for me?"

"That is what he means, and Malachi is to have the other one. What is the other one's name?"

"My friend's name is Mary."

"Mary is a nice name. My mother's name was Mary. What is your name?"

"It is Kate. What is your name?"

"Dick. That is—I mean—you may as well call me Dick as anything else. It is an easy

name, you know. I will call you Kate and Mary if you will let me."

"Certainly we will. Is it possible that you belong to these people?"

"I don't belong to them, Kate, but Captain Van Vorst is taking care of me now. I will tell you all about it when I have time. There is something else to think of now. They want to take you away across the sea, and they say they are going to kill old Petrikin and divide the money on the Firefly."

"Who is Petrikin, and what is the Firefly?"

"Petrikin is Captain Petrikin, the Dutchman, and the Firefly is the vessel in which they brought me here."

"What can you do for us, my brave little fellow?" asked Mary Forrest.

"I don't know yet. I must look around and think, and see what I can do. Can you think of anything?"

"I know of nothing yet that I could do, unless you might see my brother, or Kate Swinton's brother. If they knew where we are, and what trouble we are in, they would hasten to help us."

"Is Captain Harry Forrest, the Continental, your brother?"

"He is; and Frank Swinton is with him."

"Where could I find them?"

"I cannot even tell you that, and I fear that you can be of no assistance to us, though we thank you most heartily for your good-will."

"Don't be down-hearted, Mary and Kate, for a boy can do a great deal when he wants to. I have read of a mouse that gnawed some ropes and set free a lion, or something of the kind. I am sure that you ask God to take care of you, and I will speak about you when I say my prayers. I will see you again, and I mean to come in there if I can get a chance. I must run off now, as I think I hear some one coming. Good-by, Kate and Mary!"

The boy walked away from the cabin, leaving the girls quite happy in the thought that a friend was near, although he was but a small one.

CHAPTER X.

THE MOUSE CONTINUES TO GNAW.

ALTHOUGH little Dick spoke so confidently, and encouraged his two fair hearers, there was no ground for his confidence, for he had not formed the ghost of a plan, and knew no more than the girls themselves how he should go to work to release them.

When he had left the cabin, and really commenced to think for the first time, of the task he had undertaken, he was appalled by its difficulty, and was thoroughly puzzled to tell how to proceed. If he had had only one friend, in whom he could confide, and who could advise him, he would have felt much stronger and better fitted for the contest; but he had not one, not even old Aunt Chloe.

He concluded that he would first see Van Vorst, and ascertain whether the marauder meant to persevere in his inhuman purpose, or whether there was any possibility of persuading him from it. He sought the ranger while he was smoking a tranquilizing pipe after supper,

and found him in a good humor. He at once opened the subject that then lay nearest his heart.

"I saw you bring home two pretty ladies, captain," said he. "What do you mean to do with them? Can you sell them like you sell the black men?"

"What do you mean, boy? You are talking about what you know nothing of. What have you to do with the pretty young ladies?"

"Nothing, I suppose, and I have nothing to do here, and I wish I could go to my father. I spoke about those two young ladies, because you never brought any such home before, and because I saw them both, at the two houses where we got the black men."

"When you saw them, I suppose you heard me tell them that unless their brothers, Harry Forrest and Frank Swinton, concluded to leave me alone, and to quit hunting me down like a dog, I would strike them where it would be sure to hurt."

"I heard you say that, captain."

"Did you understand what I meant by it?"

"I supposed you meant that you would hurt the men by hurting their sisters."

"That is it precisely, boy; I have a chance to work out my spite against those fellows, and I mean to do it."

"Have the men molested you again? Have they tried to hunt you down any more?"

"Can't say that they have, but it is only because I have given them no chance, not out of any good-will and mercy. I am going to leave this country, boy, and those young women are to go with me."

"Is it right to punish them for what their brothers have done? It don't seem fair to me, captain, for I am sure that they have never hurt you, or told the men to hurt you. It would kill them if you should carry them away, and it would make you feel a great deal better to send them back and take out your spite in some other way."

"That is all very well for a boy's notion, Dicky," laughed Van Vorst; "but it is only the foolish talk of a boy. Men don't think and act in that way."

"When I spoke to you about that pretty lady with the fair face and the long bright hair, I told you that you had better not try to hurt her, or I would be angry, and might shoot you."

"I heard you say something of that kind, Dicky, and you may remember that I laughed at you, as I do now."

"I meant what I said, captain, and I mean it now. That lady with the bright hair and the blue eyes looks like my mother's picture. I don't want to hurt you, and I don't want you to hurt her. I know that I ain't as big and strong as some folks, but I won't stand by and see such a thing done, if I can help it."

"Boy!" exclaimed Van Vorst, turning fiercely upon the daring little fellow, "let me tell you, once for all, that you are going too far. Because I have taken a liking to you, and have been clever to you, you seem to think that you can do what you please. You are mistaken, my boy. My plans are my plans, and they are not to be interfered with by any mortal. I suppose you can hinder me just about as much as a squir-

rel can stop a horse, and no more; but it may be worth while to warn you, that if you should happen to do any damage, I'll—I'll wring your neck, as quick as I'd snap off the head of a snake!"

The boy turned pale, and started back in some affright, when the marauder addressed him so savagely, but he was not to be easily cowed by harsh words, and he soon resumed his bold bearing and determined expression. When the "lecture" was ended, he sullenly withdrew, and left Van Vorst to his pipe and his reflections.

"There's the devil's own mischief in that chap," muttered the ranger. "He's got spirit enough to supply half a dozen little bodies. When he gets big enough to have such a spite to work out as I have, I reckon he won't be so particular about how it's done. If he could act as big as he talks, he might do some harm, and I really believe that it will be worth while to watch him a little."

As he had found Van Vorst obdurately set upon accomplishing his purpose, and as he had no friend to assist him, the boy was thrown entirely upon his own resources, and those, he was obliged to admit, were small enough. As he lay upon his rude couch that night, he could not sleep for trying to solve the problem. He prayed for help as well as he could, and meditated upon the matter, until he hit upon a plan that seemed to offer some prospect of success.

A few miles from the swamp retreat lived an old widow woman named Murphy, the mother of Van Vorst's follower, Tom Murphy. Tom had shown Dick the way to her cabin when he took his first ride on his pony, and since that occasion he had visited the old woman several times. The Widow Murphy lived alone, and was never molested during those troublesome times, for she was considered a harmless old creature, and she employed her leisure moments in reading her Bible, and—an inconsistency not peculiar to her—cursing her dogs and cats. Dick had gained her affection by reading and talking to her, thus helping her to pass some of her lonely hours, and she, in her turn, had confided to him the great grief of her heart, her trouble about her only son, Tom Murphy.

The widow was strongly in favor of the patriot cause, but her son Tom, who was given to idle and dissolute habits, had been induced to join Van Vorst's band of marauders, who were ostensibly in the service of the king. Having joined them, the love of gain and the fear of punishment prevented him from separating from them, although his mother omitted no opportunity of praying him to do so, warning him that perseverance in his career would result in a short shrift and a stout rope.

To Widow Murphy's, therefore, Dick determined to go, in the hope that she would be able and willing to assist him to find Captain Forrest and Frank Swinton.

It was easy for him to carry out his plan, as he knew the way; he had a stout little pony, and he had lately been permitted to go and come pretty much as he chose. He was up in the morning before dawn, mounted his pony, crossed the bridge without being questioned, and rode through the canebrake path and out

into the forest track that led to Mrs. Murphy's cabin.

He found the old woman seated in her rocking-chair, engaged in her favorite occupation of endeavoring to spell out the hard words in one of the genealogy chapters of the Bible, and she was glad to see him.

"Bless your heart, Master Dicky!" she exclaimed. "The sight of you is good for sore eyes, and you've come just in time to help me read a bit of the blessed Scripture. The doctrine is precious consolatin' in these terrible times, but some of the words are mighty tryin' to my old eyes. What would you be pleased to call this name now, Master Dicky?"

"Let me see it, Mother Murphy," said the boy, taking a seat and the book at the same time. "'And at Beth marca-both, and Hazar-susim, and at Beth-berci, and at Shaaraim. These were their cities unto the reign of David.' It is no wonder that these hard words puzzled you, and I can't think what kind of consolation you get from them.

"You may know some day, Master Dicky, when you get to be old and broken down with trouble like I am. How did you leave that disobedient and wicked boy of mine?"

"Tom is as well as usual, and is not in very good business, as I think."

"He has never been in very good business, yet, honey, since he joined those rascally rangers. Did the poor boy send any message to his old mother?"

"I didn't see him this morning, as I came away very early, and wanted no one to know where I had gone. The truth is, Mother Murphy, that I am in trouble, and I want you to help me."

"What can be the matter, Master Dicky? Sure I will do anything in the world I can for you, because I believe you are one of the Lord's own lambs, though it's mighty bad company you find yourself in."

"I want you to tell me, if you can, how to find Captain Harry Forrest."

"The Lord save us! Is it that you're after? Drat that cat! The cussed critter is in my bowl of cream. Kick the baste in his dirty jaw, honey! Do you think, now, that I would betray the whereabouts of Harry Forrest and his brave men, supposin' I knew it? No, no—John Van Vorst—whom Satan will surely fly away with one of these days—is a smart man, but he must be a great deal smarter, before he can get me to tell such a secret as that, even by sending you to coax it out of me, you innocent lamb."

"But I don't ask you to betray Captain Forrest. I want you to serve him and some of his friends. I will tell you all about it."

The boy then proceeded to relate, as briefly as he could, the circumstances connected with the capture and imprisonment of the two young ladies, and to explain the intentions of Van Vorst and the Yankee with regard to them. The old woman listened with uplifted hands and expressions of horror and indignation.

"The Lord save us!" she exclaimed. "Surely we are prone to sin as the sparks to fly upward. I would have believed a'most anything that is mean of John Van Vorst, but would hardly have

believed this, if I had not had it from your own precious lips. To think that he should dare to ill-treat those sweet young ladies! There's not the like of them in all this part of the country. Sure, I know well enough where Harry Forrest is to be found, for it's not so very far from here, and he shall harry that nest of rascals and save the dear lambs, but he must not hurt my misguided boy."

"Tell me where I shall go, Mother Murphy, and I will ride fast until I find him, for something must be done quickly."

"It's not to be thought of, bless your heart! You couldn't find him, honey, even if I should point out the path to you with my own hand. Wait a bit, and I will send a boy who will bring him here, if you will let him ride your pony."

The old woman took a wooden whistle from a shelf, went to the door and blew a shrill and piercing blast. In a few minutes a ragged and dirty negro boy came running to her from the forest.

As the widow whispered a few words in his ear, he showed his ivories, assumed an air of importance, jumped on the back of Dick's horse, and rode away as fast as the swamp tackey could carry him.

"Sit you down at the table now, Master Dicky, and let me get you something to eat. It's both tired and hungry you are, for you have had a hard ride from Coombs's Hole, and I'll warrant you had not a bite to eat this morning."

The boy was glad enough to get some rest and refreshment, and he did full justice to the substantial lunch that the Widow Murphy set before him. Then he read to her and talked with her, while he waited impatiently for the return of the negro boy with Captain Forrest.

He had a long time to wait, and his patience was sorely tried, for nearly four hours had elapsed when the rattling of the pony's hoofs was heard, accompanied by the galloping of another horse, and Harry Forrest rode up and entered the cabin.

"What is the meaning of the message that you sent to me, Mother Murphy?" he hurriedly asked. "Do you know anything about my sister and Miss Swinton?"

"This boy will tell you all about it, sir, and he will tell you where to find the young ladies. But you won't hurt him, captain, I'm sure, for it's no fault of his, and you must save my wretched, misguided boy."

Forrest appealed to Dick, who explained the situation of the fair captives, and urged the partisan leader to hasten to their rescue.

"And so Van Vorst is staying at Coombs's Hole," said the young officer. "We have been all around that swamp, but never thought it worth while to search it, as we supposed there was not enough dry ground in it for an alligator to stretch himself out. Can you tell me, my brave little fellow, how to enter the swamp and cross to the island you speak of?"

The boy described the location of the path through the canebrake, and of the bridge.

"We must surprise the scoundrels. It can easily be done, now that we know where they are hid. I shall lose not a moment, and when the young ladies are rescued, they will thank

you, my noble boy, far better than I can. I will not harm your son, Mother Murphy, but will save him if I can."

"I wish you could let Captain Van Vorst go, for he has been kind to me, though he is a very wicked man," suggested Dick.

"If it comes to a fight, he must take his chance with the rest," evasively answered Forrest. "Is it possible that you belong to him? What are you doing with that gang of scoundrels?"

"I don't belong to him, sir, but I have no time to tell you about it now. I must ride back to the swamp as soon as I can, for I am afraid of being missed, and I want to take care of Kate and Mary."

Notwithstanding the solicitations of Harry Forrest and the widow, Dick mounted his pony and rode off, with his heart full of bright hopes, among which hovered a few clouds of apprehension.

CHAPTER XI.

A LONG TRAIL.

ALTHOUGH Benny Lox started on his scouting expedition so hastily, and with no apparent preparation, he was well enough provided for the business that he had undertaken. He carried his musket, pistol, and long hunting-knife, and the capacious pockets of his hunting-shirt were stuffed with meal and slices of cold bacon. In fact, the scout was always thus armed and equipped, carrying his arsenal and provision depot upon his person. The wooden canteen, filled with rum, that he usually took, was omitted on this occasion, for Benny was thoroughly in earnest, and resolved to find the hiding-place of the marauders, and to do his part toward effecting the rescue of the young ladies, both of whom were admired and loved through the whole district.

The two went to work without any delay, and with no unnecessary words, for they were fully impressed with the importance of their duty, and aware that what they did must be done quickly.

They went to the place at which Julius had left the trail, and it was easily found, as it passed over soft ground, and nothing had occurred to obliterate the marks of the horses' feet. As soon as Benny Lox saw the track he started forward, with his eyes bent on the ground, and Julius followed him, both traveling with a long and regular "lope," that carried them on quite rapidly.

Thus they continued, until the trail came to hard and strong ground, where it was difficult to see it in the daytime, and impossible at night, and they were obliged to stop and rest until morning.

As soon as it was light enough to see, they were awake and on their way, and slowly followed the trail till they again found it plainly marked in easy ground. They were not to accomplish their task without difficulty, for John Van Vorst, who knew that he would be suspected and sharply pursued, was not the man to leave his tracks uncovered, and he knew, as well as any one, how to double, and turn, and foil his hunters. He had walked his horses down into a broad stream, or "branch," the current of

which he had followed upward for a considerable distance, and at the point where he left it, the sand of the shore had been brushed over the tracks, so as to leave no sign of the direction that had been taken.

Both Benny Lox and Julius were aware that he had employed this stratagem, as it was a very common one, but that knowledge did not make it any easier to track him. They could plainly see where he had gone into the stream, but it was quite a difficult question to decide at what place he had come out. It required careful search and considerable time to discover the trail again, and when it was found, at a distance from the branch, the hour of noon had passed, and the scouts paused to satisfy their hunger.

The sky, which had been overcast during the morning, became more threatening in appearance before they had finished their frugal meal. Dark masses of cloud were rolling up from the southwest, and everything portended an approaching storm. Benny Lox started up, declaring that they had no time to lose, as the rain might spoil the trail entirely, and the two scouts again set forward with renewed eagerness and speed.

Again they were destined to be disappointed and baffled, for Van Vorst had turned into a traveled road, where the tracks of his horses' feet were so mingled with others, that it soon became impossible to distinguish them. While Benny Lox was endeavoring to trace out the footmarks which he had been following, it commenced to sprinkle, and he had hardly located, according to the best of his judgment, the point at which they had left the road, when the rain poured down in torrents, almost obliterating every kind of track.

No longer able to guide themselves by the footmarks, they could only guess at the direction that had been taken by Van Vorst, and follow that course, in the hope that they might strike the trail.

When they had traveled a few miles further, and were apparently no nearer the object of their search than when they started, Benny Lox stopped, and sat down on the ground with a sorrowful countenance.

"Blamed ef I see the use of goin' any further," said he. "I give in, Julius. I'm reg'lar stumped. P'raps I mought hev been able to foller the mean cusses, though I wouldn't ha' been willin' to sw'ar that I struck the right track out of the road; but that blasted rain has wiped out every chance, and we may as well be gittin' back to camp. 'Twould be as easy to find a needle in a haystack as to hunt up John Van Vorst without a trail to lead you."

"Pears like there's plenty tracks round here, Benny Lox," suggested Julius. "Dar's hoss tracks right whar I'm standin'."

"Tracks enough, no doubt, but whose tracks are they?—and of what use are they to us? Do you s'pose I'm sech a fool as to foller an old trail?"

"P'raps Van Vorst be hid away somewhar in de swamp here. Do you know dat swamp, Benny Lox?"

"Reckon I do. It's what's known as Coombs's Hole. No use talkin' 'bout thar bein' in thar. We've hunted for 'em all round that swamp,

and we know thar's no place whar a dog could creep in. I tell you what I mean to do, Julius, and take the chances. The tracks about here are purty thick, and they all seem to keep together, as if goin' to the same place. I mean to take that trail, though it may hev been made by our own folks, and to foller it up, if it takes me to Charleston or the Coosaw. Come on, Julius!"

"All right, Benny Lox! Dis chile kin foller wherebber you kin lead."

So they again started forward, leaving behind them the real hiding-place of Van Vorst and his marauders. But they were on the trail that led between Coombs's Hole and the landing-place of the Firefly, and they could not follow it to its termination without learning something.

It was night when they discovered that they were in the neighborhood of the Coosaw, and their conviction grew stronger that they were approaching some retreat of their enemy, for the tracks still kept together and moved in the same direction, as if the riders had known precisely where they were going, and had had a definite object in view.

As the scouts passed down into the low and swampy bottom, Benny Lox suddenly stopped, and pointed at a light that shone through an opening in the tall cypresses.

"Reckon we've come to the end of the trail at last," said he. "We've found somebody, and 'tain't likely they're friends."

"Some folks a-huntin', I 'spect," suggested Julius.

"Moughtn't we be purty nigh the Coosaw, 'cordin to your calkilation?"

"De ribber ain't fur from here, sart'in. T'ink I see de water shinin'. 'Spect somebody down a-fishin', Benny Lox."

"I 'spect you're a fool. Do you s'pose all that trail was made by a fishin'-party? I know better, and I'm goin' to see what it is. Come along, Julius, and don't make enough noise to rouse a snake."

Silently the two scouts crept toward the light, and soon they reached the shore of a broad lagoon, that lay black and sluggish before them, completely hemmed in by the forest of great trees. Near a small cove at the right was a fire, from which came the light that had attracted their attention; and in front of them, on the opposite side of the lagoon, was a two-masted vessel, whose dark hull and tall spars were thrown out into bold relief by the red light that gleamed across the water.

"What in thunder is that thing?" asked Benny, who had never seen any water craft larger than a "dug-out."

"Dat's a ship, by golly! and I wonder how it got in dar, 'less it was born dar. Didn't you eber see a ship afore, Benny Lox? I've see'd lots ob 'em. When I was up to Cha'leston, wid de kunnel, I see'd a heap o' ships, some ob 'em ten times as large as that."

"Hold your tongue, you blasted fool, or speak lower, unless you want us to be found out and have our long tramp for nothin'. We must sneak up to the fire, Julius, and get a notion of what this thing means."

Silently again they crawled forward, carefully avoiding the treacherous places of the swamp,

and choosing secure footing on the turfy hummocks, until they were able, by crouching down behind a fallen tree, both to see and hear the four men who were seated around the fire.

They need not have been so very cautious, for the four men were not accustomed to woodland ways, or in the habit of watching for outlying enemies, being Malachi Slicker, Ben Ducket, and two other seamen of the crew of the Firefly. They had a can of grog, which was freely passed around among them, as they listened to Malachi who was holding forth in confidential tones.

"I guess it's all understood between us now," were the first words that the concealed scouts heard. "You keep the niggers safe in your barracoon here, and I will attend to the other matters. I will bring the gals down here tomorrow, and then we will load in the niggers and get under way, and then hurrah for a clear field and a plenty of money."

"There's only one thing I don't adzackly take to about it," replied Ben Ducket. "I hardly feel like sending the old Dutchman to Davy Jones, though I don't like him overmuch and had rather have his gold than his company."

"That wasn't my idee, shipmate; it was the notion of that robbing and murdering scoundrel Van Vorst, who wanted to put Jants out of the way, divide the money with me, and go off in the schooner himself. My plan is the best in every way, as I only propose to set the old Dutchman ashore, and give you fellows his half of the money while I keep my own."

"I thought your part was only a third," interposed Ducket.

"Mistaken there, Ben. A full half belongs to me. That Van Vorst is such a murderous wretch, and he has got his idee so set on this schooner, that I have no doubt he will bring down his gang and cut all our throats if we stay here much longer. I rather guess I've spoiled his plan, though, for I have arranged matters so that he won't be likely to show his ugly face near the schooner again, and we will have the niggers for nothing. If you're sure that the other men will go with us, we can carry out the plan as easy as cuttin a rope yarn, and each of you men will get a fine sum of money. For my part, I only want that black-eyed gal, and I will be satisfied."

"There's no doubt that the other chaps will come in to what we are agreed to," replied Ben Ducket. "I'll warp the schooner out from the shore to-night, for it will be better to do the business with one of the boats. As that is settled, and we we have drank up the grog, we had better go aboard and turn in."

The four men arose and walked to a boat that lay at the shore, which they entered and rode to the schooner.

They were hardly out of sight, when a short and fat man stepped out from behind a bush near the scouts, puffing and rubbing his face.

"Mein Gott in Himmel! Vot I does mit dat t'roat-cuttin' tuifel!" he muttered, as he walked toward the schooner and disappeared in the darkness.

"Reckon you understand that, Julius," said Benny Lox.

"The cap'n's sister and Miss Kate Swinton are the gals what that long-legged chap was talkin'

about, and he is to bring 'em down here to-mor-rer."

"Dat's a fac', Benny. He means to carry 'em off on de ship dar, what he calls a schooner. 'Spect somebody gwine to sp'ile dat fun."

"All we have to do is to git back to Cap'n Forrest with the news, jest as soon as we kin. Ef we had some hosses now, the stampin' and snortin' critters mought be of some use to us; but we hain't got 'em, and thar's no use in grumblin'."

The two scouts hastened off through the forest, striking as straight a line as they could for Forrest's camp, and it was not long before they were followed by Malachi Slicker, who was on his way to Coombs's Hole, by a different route from that which they were then taking.

CHAPTER XII.

A DOUBLE TRAITOR.

BAD news flies swiftly. It was but a short time after the abduction of the two young ladies was known, that the tidings were brought to Mrs. Swinton's house, the bearer being Cato, the unfortunate negro whom Julius stigmatized as so "lazy and good fur nuffin'." The loss of his young mistress had not been occasioned by any fault of Cato, and the faithful old fellow was as deeply and sincerely troubled by it as any of the rest of the family. It is certain that he made a great outcry and hullabaloo about it when he came home, sending Mrs. Swinton into a fit of hysterics, by which she was entirely prostrated.

As the old lady was unable to give directions, or to do anything in the matter, the burden of care fell upon Major Coningsby, who was so attached to the family that the abduction of Kate seemed like a personal bereavement to him. He happened to be encamped on the plantation, with a portion of his squadron, when the news was received, and he was glad of an opportunity to serve his kind hostess.

The major, together with all others about the place, immediately suspected Van Vorst and his gang. In fact, there was no one else to suspect, for the ranger would not permit any other scoundrels to plunder in that neighborhood. Major Coningsby had been informed by Mrs. Swinton of Van Vorst's outrage upon her property, and of the threats that he had made against Kate. The recital had made him very indignant, and he regretted that he had had anything to do with Van Vorst, who had been recommended to him by his predecessor as a very useful person. He had promised the widow that her slaves should be recovered, and that the marauder should be punished for his lawless acts.

The first step to be taken was to find Van Vorst, and it happened that the major, although he had had business transactions with him, was not acquainted with his hiding-place.

The major knew, however, where to find a man named Morris, who had served him as a scout, and who, he believed, would be able and willing to lead him to the ranger's retreat. He resolved to go in search of this man, and accordingly mounted his horse and rode forth, accompanied only by his orderly. Both were well armed, but even that precaution was hardly considered necessary, as the neighborhood was believed to be entirely clear of the patriot forces.

In order to reach Morris's cabin, Coningsby was obliged to pass through a range of thick forest, traversed by a road that was but little better than a bridle-path. He had gone about half-way through it, when he was greeted by a loud and peremptory challenge:

"Who goes there? Halt and surrender!"

As the major and his companion drew rein, two men stepped into the road with muskets cocked and pointed at them. One was dressed in the imitation of uniform that was worn by partizan leaders, and he repeated the challenge.

"I am an officer of his Majesty's dragoons. Stand aside or surrender yourselves," replied Coningsby.

"Then you are the very man I want; I know you, Major Coningsby. You had better dismount and surrender, for your pistols are no match for our muskets."

"I am not to be so easily captured, young sir. To whom am I expected to surrender?"

"To Lieutenant Frank Swinton, on detached duty from General Sumter's brigade."

"If you are Frank Swinton, I propose a truce; I have just come from your mother's house, and have some important news for you."

"Is it about my sister and Mary Forrest?" eagerly asked the young gentleman, lowering his weapon.

"It is. Have you heard of their disappearance?"

"I learned it last night, and I am endeavoring to find some clew by which I may search for them. They have been taken by that infernal scoundrel, John Van Vorst, and his gang, who have been encouraged and protected by you British officers."

"I have only lately learned that he has been guilty of outrages upon peaceful inhabitants, and I am sure that I would never encourage him in such conduct; I have sworn that if he has been guilty of the deed, I will hang him and every man who was concerned with him. I am now on my way to see a person who can tell me, I think, where the villains can be found. Do you know anything about him? Have you any clew to his rendezvous?"

"I have not; but I will find him if he is above-ground. You have proposed a truce, Major Coningsby; I agree to it, and I ask that it may continue until this matter is settled—until my sister and my friend's sister are recovered, and those who committed the outrage are properly punished. We would have hunted down that plundering and marauding gang before now, if we had not been prevented by your force, which is too large for us to cope with at present."

"I am willing that the truce shall be continued, and will co-operate with you as far as possible. If you learn where the young ladies are before I do, send word to me at your mother's. Your messengers shall be protected, and I will assist you with my force. I am going now to see a man named Henry Morris, from whom I expect to gain some information."

"If you are going to see him, major, we had better separate, for Morris is afraid of me, and you could not induce him to confess anything in my presence. We will seek the same end by our different routes, and there shall be a peace

between us until our object is accomplished. Then we must be enemies, as long as King George sees fit to deny the independence of these Colonies."

"Be it so, and may this not be the last truce between us," answered Coningsby, as he went his way, and Frank Swinton and his follower walked in an opposite direction.

The major's ride was fated to be an eventful one. He had gone but a mile or so further, when he was again halted, but this time the challenge was a peaceful one, and was made by an unarmed man; he was met by a tall, lean and awkward-looking person, with a sharp face and sandy hair, who stopped in the path and spoke to him.

"I rather guess you're a British officer, ain't you now?" was his Yankee mode of asking a question.

"I am Major Coningsby, commanding a squadron of his Majesty's dragoons. How can I serve you?"

"Two young ladies in these parts have been carried away from their homes by a marauding scoundrel called Van Vorst, who pretends to be fighting for the king."

"I know that he so pretends, but the representatives of his Majesty never sanction such outrages. Do you know where he is. Can you tell me whither he has taken the young ladies?"

"I can just tell you all about it. Perhaps you know a swamp-like place called Coombs's Hole; if you don't, most any of the people about here can tell you where he is, and show it to you. That is the place where he has the gals locked up, and he means to keep them."

"Who are you? Are you connected with his gang?"

"I am called Malachi Slicker; I kinder joined 'em awhile ago, because they claimed to be fighting for the king, but I've left 'em because I can't stand such goings-on. I think that man, Van Vorst, ought to be punished in some way, major, for he's an awful villain."

"I intend to hang him when I catch him. As you are so well acquainted with his retreat, suppose you act as our guide."

"Couldn't think of doing that, major. It would never do for me to be known in the matter, and I must go back and get a little property of mine before I quit them entirely. Any of the people about here can tell you where Coombs's Hole is, and they all know a big canebrake that lies on one side of it. On the southwest edge of the canebrake, just behind a bunch of tall bushes, a road is cut into the brake; following that road, and crossing the water on a bridge, you reach the island on which they have their camp, and that's where the gals are. You must take plenty of men, and must be sure to make the attack to-morrow, or the cuss will be gone. There is no use in my going with you, and I had much rather not, but I wish you the best of luck, and hope that the black-hearted scoundrel will be soon swinging from a tree."

"You may rely upon it that he will receive the punishment that he deserves. I wish you would call upon me at my quarters, when you get clear of that place."

"I'll do it, major, thank ye. Good-morning." The Yankee turned away whistling, and

Major Coningsby quickening his pace, resumed his ride to Morris's cabin. He found that worthy at home, and engaged his services as a guide, arresting him and taking him to camp in order to be sure that he should be forthcoming when wanted.

This was the plan of which Malachi boasted when he told the seamen that he had so arranged matters that Van Vorst would not be likely to show his ugly face near the schooner again.

He had been quite unpleasantly surprised by the ranger's announcement that he also intended to fly the country in the schooner, and to take Kate Swinton with him. Such an arrangement was in every way distasteful to the Yankee, and particularly so because it would deprive him of half the value of the Firefly, which he expected to make entirely his own.

It did not take him a long time to determine what course he should pursue. If he could get Mary Forrest on board of the schooner, and put Van Vorst out of the way, he knew that he could make a much better bargain with Ben Ducket and the other seamen. He concluded that the best way to get rid of the ranger would be to betray him to the patriots or the British; either of whom, he had no doubt, would slay the wretch, or at least keep him out of the way until the schooner could get off.

He was on his way to Colonel Forrest's residence when he fortunately fell in with Major Coningsby, with whom he had the interview that has been related. When the major told his name, Malachi thought, for a moment, of disclosing to him all he knew about the boy who had been brought from the North on the Firefly; but he reflected that it would involve an explanation that would be too long and too personal to himself, and that it would only interfere with his grand object; therefore, he prudently held his tongue on that subject.

Satisfied that the good fortune which had thus far attended him would continue to be on his side, he hastened down to the vessel to make his bargain with the seamen. As has been shown, he was obliged to promise to divide half the gold and silver with them; but as this plan would give him possession of the schooner, and would free him from the troublesome presence of Van Vorst, he felt that he had no reason to complain.

Highly pleased with the success of his new negotiations, he went back to Coombs's Hole. He then had nothing to do but to get the young ladies down to the lagoon on the Coosaw as soon as possible, leaving Van Vorst behind to be captured by the British. In this also, as will be seen, he was favored by fortune.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MOUSE TRAPPED.

THE joy that little Dick felt, after his interview with Harry Forrest, at the prospect of the release of his two fair friends, was nearly balanced by his apprehensions, for he feared that he had been so long absent, after his threatening conversation with Van Vorst, that his object would be suspected.

His misgivings were not without foundation. His absence had been noticed, and his return

was observed by Van Vorst, who, as he looked at the tired pony and the worn-out boy, and remembered the hot words that were spoken the night before, had no difficulty in guessing for what purpose Dick had been taking a long and hard ride.

He was angry enough, at first, to use harsh measures, as he had threatened; but the cruel and lawless man really loved the boy, and admired his spirit and daring. Besides, he wanted to find out what Dick had been doing, so that he might know what course to take.

Accordingly, he said nothing to the boy, but directed Tom Murphy, if Dick desired to enter the cabin in which the young ladies were confined, to allow him to do so, and prepared to place himself in a position to hear what passed between them.

He was right in his conjecture that Dick would hasten to communicate his news, if he had any. The boy was so anxious to tell Kate and Mary how he had prospered, that he disregarded his fatigue, and hastened to seek them as soon as he had taken care of his pony. The chink in the rear of the cabin was now too small and inconvenient an opening to suit his purposes, and he boldly applied to Tom Murphy for permission to enter at the door. Somewhat to his surprise, his request was immediately granted.

The two girls were overjoyed to see their young friend again, for they had begun to fear that he had deserted them, or that his communication with them and his efforts to aid them had been discovered, and had brought him into trouble.

He took a seat, and immediately commenced to tell his story.

"You must let me sit down," said he, "for I have been riding a long way, and am tired. I have seen Captain Forrest, and he will come to rescue you as soon as possible."

"You have seen Harry!" joyfully exclaimed both. "How did you meet him? Where did you find him?"

"I started early in the morning, and rode out to the cabin of an old woman, who lives several miles from here. After I had told her that you were here and in great trouble, I asked her where I could find Captain Forrest; she sent a boy for him, mounted on my pony, and he came to the cabin, but it seemed to me that he was a long time coming, for I was very impatient."

"You brave, good boy! We could not believe that Providence would raise up such a friend for us."

"I told him all about it," continued Dick, "and he was very glad to learn where you were, and how he could find you. He said that he would lose no time in getting his men together and coming to help you; so I think that you may certainly expect him here to-morrow, and then you will be free. I told him that he mustn't hurt Captain Van Vorst, because he has been very kind to me, and I almost love him, although he is such a wicked man."

Mary Forrest's eyes were filled with tears of gratitude, as she clasped her hands, and silently thanked God for this prospect of release; but Kate Swinton was more demonstrative in expressing her joy. She threw her arms about the boy, kissed his fair cheek and clear brow, and

hugged him until his golden hair was sadly rumpled.

"You nice, blessed, glorious darling!" she exclaimed. "Who would have thought that such a little fellow could have such a big heart! You shall go home with me, my precious boy, and shall never lead such a hard life again. How can we ever thank you, for daring and doing so much for us? We will be free, Mary! Harry and Frank will come for us, and will take us from this horrid place. Thank God! Thank God!"

"Don't speak so loud," implored Dick. "I am afraid we might be overheard, and then the plan would be spoiled."

"That is very good advice, but it comes too late," said a harsh voice.

Looking around, they saw Van Vorst standing in the door, regarding them with a malicious smile.

"Oh, yes; I have heard it all," said he, answering Dick's surprised glance. "It was a very nice plan, my boy, but it has been found out, and that puts an end to it. Reckon I ought to be much obliged to you for telling Forrest to be careful about hurting me. Precious little mercy he would show me, if he had me in his power, and precious little I would ask from the proud-spirited pest. You shall go with that pretty lady with the blue eyes, Master Dicky, but you shall go where I choose and not where she wishes. You will be far away from here before Harry Forrest can reach Coombs's Hole."

"I don't want you to think that I feel a bit bad about what I have done," retorted Dick. "I am only sorry that it has been found out, and I would do the same thing this minute, and more too, if I had the chance."

"I don't doubt it. You gave me fair warning last night, and I told you that I would wring your neck if you interfered with me. Come, my chicken."

"Don't hurt him!" entreated Kate, as she placed herself, with streaming eyes and outstretched hands, in front of the boy. "Surely you will not kill him or beat him, for the fault is ours. We entreated him to help us, and we alone are to blame."

"I am not going to harm him, pretty one. Didn't you hear him say that I had been kind to him, and that he almost loved me? It wouldn't be an easy thing for me to misuse that boy, and I had much rather be hurt by him than hurt him, but I must fix him so that he can't do any more harm. Come, you young rebel."

The ranger led away the boy, who was sad but defiant, and left the two girls in tears, for they thought their last hope was taken from them and they deeply grieved about the brave boy who had got into trouble for their sakes.

The ranger took Dick to his own cabin, gave him something to eat, and then told him to lie down and sleep, as he needed rest. The boy soon fell asleep, when Van Vorst placed a guard over him, and went to make new arrangements in view of the threatened rescue.

Now that his retreat was discovered, it must of necessity be abandoned, for there could be no doubt Forrest would soon pay him a visit, and that the partisan force, larger and better or-

ganized than his own, could capture the camp. He directed his followers to place in concealment all property of any value that could not easily be carried, and ordered them to pack up all their effects, and hold themselves in readiness to march at a moment's notice.

With regard to his fair captives, he determined to send them immediately to the lagoon on the Coosaw, and only waited until Malachi Slicker should return and inform him what were the prospects of the plot against Petrikin and the schooner.

It was about midnight when that worthy made his appearance, and the ranger, without making known what had really occurred, informed him that he thought there was danger of a rescue if he should keep his prisoners much longer at that place, and that he had decided to send them down to the schooner without delay.

Nothing could have better pleased the Yankee, whose only remaining anxiety was with regard to getting Mary Forest on board the Firefly as soon as possible, and it was with difficulty that he concealed his exultation. He assured the ranger that they would have no trouble in carrying out the plot, as his plans were nearly completed, and the schooner might be taken out of the lagoon within a short time.

"I've been thinking," said he, "that it wouldn't be safe to keep the gals here any longer, and that it would be better to have them on board the vessel, so that we might start at any minute. If they are ready to go, as I suppose they are, I will take them right down to the river, and then there will be no danger of losing them. As for you, you had better stay here a while, because there are two of those sailor chaps with whom I will have to work a little more, in order to persuade them to join us, and it won't do for you to show yourself before we are ready to strike. To-morrow night you can come, and then we will soon get clear of this country."

"Very well," answered Van Vorst, who had begun to suspect that his partner did not mean to treat him fairly, and who had plans of his own. "I have some business that will keep me employed during the day, and I will come down to the river to-morrow night."

"Before that time," thought Malachi, "he will be hung or shot, and I will be on the water in the Firefly."

The two ladies and little Dick were aroused, placed on horseback, and started off immediately, in the care of the Yankee and half a dozen of the marauders. The journey was made in silence, glances of sorrow and sympathy being the only communications exchanged between the fair prisoners and their young friend. It was not quite daylight when they reached their destination, and they were immediately taken on board the Firefly, while the men who had accompanied them encamped near the rude hut in which the stolen negroes were confined.

Malachi explained to Petrikin, who woke up and asked what was the matter, that his charges had been sent by Van Vorst, who wished them to be kept securely. The fat captain smiled knowingly, but said nothing, and the Yankee locked up his prisoners in the cabin, after which he laid down on the deck to sleep.

There was no more sleep for the girls, al-

though Dicky, who was not half rested, soon succumbed to drowsiness again. This, thought Mary, was the fate Malachi Slicker had promised her—to be carried away across the sea, and forced to become his wife—and Kate Swinton could only suppose that she was destined to a similar lot. Mary Forrest bore up bravely, and did her best to cheer and console her friend, who was quite broken down by her grief.

The sun was peeping over the tops of the trees, when Dick awoke, sat upon the cabin floor, rubbed his eyes, and looked around in bewilderment.

As he did so, the door was unlocked and opened, and the round, ruddy face of Jants Petrikin appeared at the companionway. The Dutchman had evidently been drinking heavily, for his voice was thick, and he was obliged to steady himself against the combing, but his little eyes had a good-humored twinkle, and the impression of his fat features was intended to be quite benignant.

"Coom here, leetle boy," said he; "coom up on deck mit de ladies, and old Jants s'all let you all go."

There was such a kindness in his manner, that Dick rose and followed him, beckoning to Mary and Kate to do likewise. Petrikin led the way, staggering and lurching to and fro, until he reached the waist of the schooner. Then Dick observed that the Firefly had dropped out into the middle of the lagoon, and that the Yankee lay on the deck, bound and gagged, and that there was no one else in sight, except Petrikin and themselves.

"What does it mean?" he asked. "What is the matter with Malachi, and where are the crew?"

"Never you mind, leetle boy. Dey's all ashoor, droonk like hogs, and I keeps dat rascal for mine-self. Guess I teach him how to rob mine gold and put me off de schooner. I string him up mit his neck, shoost like a hog."

"Serve him right, for I heard him say that he was going to kill you and carry these pretty ladies away on the Firefly. You will let us go, won't you, Jants?"

"Yes; you shall go, as I told you. Get into dis leetle boat at de side, and row him ashore; den hide him under de bank, and hide yourselves in de bushes until all be dead droonk or asleep, and then run away somewheres. I settle mit dis Gonnetigut (Connecticut) rascal and all odder rascals."

Dick needed no urging, but made his fair companions enter the light little boat, which he pulled ashore as swiftly and as silently as he could. With their assistance he drew it up under the bushes, in a thick clump of which he concealed himself and his fellow-fugitives, and they rested from their exertions.

They had been there but a few moments, when they heard the sound of approaching horsemen. Dick put his head out of his shelter, but quickly drew it in again, as he saw the dreaded Van Vorst ride down to the shore, accompanied by several of his gang.

CHAPTER XIV.

AT BAY.

JOHN VAN VORST did not intend that the

Yankee should reach the river much in advance of himself. He had good reason to believe that Malachi would play the traitor at any time, if he could advance his own interests by doing so, and did not intend to give him much opportunity for the display of his treachery.

As soon as the concealment of the property in the camp was completed, he sent off the greater part of his men to another of his retreats, telling them that he would join them in the course of that day or the next, and reserving only a few of his best and most reliable followers.

With these, he finally took leave of Coombs's Hole, a little after daylight. He destroyed the only bridge by which the island could be reached, and rode off toward the lagoon, resolved that the Firefly should be his in spite of any fate.

The more he reflected, the more he became convinced that the best thing he could do would be to leave the country while he had a good chance to escape with his life and his ill-gotten gains. The presence of the schooner afforded him the opportunity, and he was fully determined to avail himself of it.

As soon as he began to suspect Malachi of an intention to play foul with him, he resolved that the Yankee should die if his suspicions proved to be well-founded, and that he would, on his own account, take possession of the Firefly and the treasure on board of her, and use them both to further his own purposes. It was in this humor that he rode down to the lagoon, prepared to act as circumstances should dictate.

His suspicions were excited as soon as he reached the shore, by the fact that the schooner was no longer moored by the bank as she had previously been, but was anchored out in the deep water, at a considerable distance from the land, nearly out of the range of musket-shot. He could see no one on her deck, nor any sign of human life on the vessel or on the shore.

After hallooing in vain, both for Malachi and Petrikin, he concluded that the two smugglers and their crew must be somewhere ashore, and proceeded to search for them.

He soon found the hut in which the negroes were confined, and near it, grouped about an empty cask, and with empty junk bottles scattered around them, were the crew of the schooner and the members of his band who had been sent with Malachi in charge of the prisoners.

All were in different stages of drunkenness, none being touched with a mild form of the disease, and it was only by pulling, pinching, rolling and kicking them, that he could arouse any of them, and get any thing like an answer to his indignant questions. Pomp, the black cook of the Firefly, was the first who partially recovered his consciousness, and he turned over, rolled up the yellows of his eyes, and mumbled a reply.

"It's all right. Massa Malachi is on board de schooner, and de cap'n is on board de schooner, and we's here drunk. It's all right; de Firefly is gwine to drop out into de ribber, and gib de slip to dat cussed land pirate, and we gits de money. Yab! Gimme some mo' rum."

"I have come in time," thought the ranger. "That two-faced villain has meant to trick me, after I had got the girl for him, and to make

another bargain with the Dutchman or with these fellows. He had good cause to wish me to stay away until night, as he expected to be out of my reach by that time. Let me lay my hands on him and his rascally carcass will soon be dangling from one of these tall cypresses."

With the aid of the men who had come with him, he dragged his own drunken fellows and Ben Duckett to the shore, where he caused them to be drenched, rolled and pummeled, until they became stupidly and miserably sober. Then, by dint of threats and close questioning, he induced Duckett to disclose what he knew about the plot that had been proposed to him by Malachi.

The ranger's indignation increased to fury when he learned that the double traitor not only intended to throw him off entirely, but that he had made arrangements with the seamen, by which Petrikin was to be put off of the vessel, and half the money in the strong-box was to be divided among the crew, while Malachi should appropriate the remainder.

"Is there no way of getting out to the schooner?" he asked. "Where is the boat that you came ashore in?"

"We didn't come ashore in a boat; we walked ashore on the plank. The craft has been warped out into the stream since then."

"What can be the matter with Malachi? Why don't he show himself?"

"Don't know. The old Harry must have got foul of the Firefly, or every thing aboard of her must be asleep. I'll hail her, if you want me to."

"Very well; try your voice."

The sailor put his hand to his mouth, and yelled "Firefly aho-o-y!" in true nautical style.

The hail was repeated again and again, and after a while Jants Petrikin staggered up to the bulwark, holding a case-bottle in one hand and steadying himself with the other.

"You go mit de tuyfel," he was understood to say, as he roared back in a husky voice; "I knows you. You wants to kill me and take mine ship and mine gold. You go-o mit de tuyfel!"

Van Vorst and his men answered with a volley of bullets, at which the Dutchman laughed, and disappeared from view.

"Can't somebody get an ax?" bellowed the ranger. "There must be one somewhere on shore. We will make a raft and go off and bring that cabbage-headed fool to his senses."

An ax was found, after considerable delay, and one of the men was set at work to cut down trees and trim them, while the others prepared withes for binding them together.

While this work was being done, and when the raft was nearly completed, Van Vorst's quick ears caught the sound of horses tramping through the swamp, and the breaking of brittle twigs and dry limbs. He at once ordered his men to get their guns, and they had hardly done so, when the horsemen who had been approaching came out through the trees, and the forest seemed to be alive with them.

Van Vorst at once saw that they were Harry Forrest's men, headed by the young partisan captain and Frank Swinton. He knew that he was cornered, that he was confronted by a su-

perior force, that defeat awaited him, and that he must be captured or killed unless he could effect his escape. Whatever his fate might be, whichever way he should turn, it was plain that his fine plan was spoiled, and his only consolation was in the thought that vengeance would also be visited upon that double traitor, Malachi Slicker.

He felt no fear, for he was a brave and desperate man, and he resolved to sell his life as dearly as possible, if it must be lost. His men were animated by the same spirit, as they knew that they fought with halters around their necks, and they closed about their leader, prepared to perish by his side, but, like the serpent, to die biting.

"Surrender, you Tory scoundrels!" shouted Forrest. "John Van Vorst, I have caught you at last, and the day of reckoning has come. Where is my sister? Where is Miss Swinton?"

"Where you will never see them again. Find them if you can," answered the ranger, with a malignant laugh. "I've had my spite out of you, you infernal pest, and I am ready to die as I have lived. Come on, if you dare!"

"If you have harmed a hair of their heads, I will have you torn in pieces. You had better surrender, you men, and mercy will be shown to some of you. Those who resist will receive no quarter."

This indefinite offer was greeted with scornful laughter, to which the partisans replied by a volley, which had little or no effect among their enemies, as they had been gradually availing themselves of the cover of the trees. Now that the fight was begun, they gradually fell back toward the negro hut, near which their horses had been left. They kept up a fire as they went, and were soon reinforced by the crew of the Firefly, who were then pretty well sobered and able to use their pistols. The sailors joined in the fight without exactly knowing what it was about, and the contest became a hot one.

The partisans, unable to use their horses among the trees, dismounted and adopted the tactics of their adversaries, endeavoring to surround them. They had nearly succeeded in so doing, and Forrest was about to order a charge, when the face of affairs was suddenly changed by the appearance of a troop of British dragoons, commanded by Major Coningsby.

The marauders and their antagonists ceased firing, as if by common consent, and waited to see the meaning of this new development.

CHAPTER XV.

GEORGE COLVILLE CONINGSBY.

WHEN Major Coningsby explained to Morris, his scout, the purpose for which he wished to find Van Vorst, that individual not only consented to assist him, but was anxious to do so, as he, in common with the rest of the neighborhood, was greatly grieved at the abduction of the two beautiful and amiable girls. It was true that he was not any more honest than he ought to be, and that he had not scrupled to replenish his purse by occasionally joining Van Vorst in his plundering expeditions; but such an outrage as the last perpetrated by the marauder was too gross and high-handed to meet his approval, and he expressed his entire willingness to aid in bringing the offender to justice.

Major Coningsby immediately made his preparations, and told Mrs. Swinton to be of good cheer, as he had reason to believe that he would be successful, and thought that he could soon bring home her lost daughter. Early the next morning, taking a sufficient number of dragoons to overwhelm the small body of marauders, he set out for Coombs's Hole, with Morris as guide.

The same morning, but at an earlier hour, another expedition had started, from another quarter, for the same destination. It was commanded by Harry Forrest, and its object was the same as of the party commanded by Coningsby.

The young officer had hastened back to his camp as soon as he had received from Dick the important intelligence that Van Vorst's retreat was at Coombs's Hole, where the young ladies were imprisoned. He collected his men as speedily as possible, a number of them being scattered about the country as scouts, and set out shortly after midnight, eager to rescue his sister and his promised bride, and to take vengeance on the wretches who had dared to ill-treat them.

He had not gone far when he met Frank Swinton, who was returning from his unsuccessful attempt to find Van Vorst and his gang. The lieutenant was quite downhearted at his failure, but he was immediately made glad by the news that the ranger's retreat had been discovered, and that his friends were on their way to attack it. Of course he joined the party, and they eagerly pressed forward.

A short time before reaching Coombs's Hole, they encountered Benny Lox and Julius, who were on their way to the camp to communicate the intelligence that they had gained down on the Coosaw, and who were overjoyed at meeting Forrest and his men. When Harry learned what they had heard and seen, he directed them to mount behind two of his horsemen, and hurried on, impatient to make his attack before the plans of either Van Vorst or Malachi could be carried out.

In this he was disappointed. He found the blind road that led through the canebrake into the swamp, but the bridge by which the island was reached had been demolished. A scout who swam across soon returned and informed him that the camp had been evacuated. As there could be no doubt that the ranger had gone down to the river, he ordered his men to move on at full speed, and followed on the track of his enemy.

He had been gone but a short time, when Major Coningsby, with his troop of dragoons, also arrived at Coombs's Hole, and discovered that the marauders had escaped. He was at a loss to decide what to do; but Morris, who knew of the rendezvous at the river, assured him that they had gone thither, as a fresh and broad trail led in that direction, and the major immediately followed on after Forrest. As has been seen, his arrival at the lagoon occasioned a pause in the fight, and both parties stood still, as if waiting to see what shape this armed intervention would take.

The two young ladies and little Dick had remained concealed in the bushes since they came ashore from the Firefly, and had watched all the proceedings with anxious interest.

They crouched down behind the bushes, when the firing became rapid, and the yells and shrieks of the combatants told that they were fiercely engaged. They waited, hoping and fearing, until the noise of the musketry ceased, on the arrival of the British. Then they ventured to peep out from their hiding-place, and saw the red-coats and the gleaming sabers of the dragoons.

"May God save our friends now!" implored Mary. "The British are here, and they will overwhelm Frank and his brave fellows."

"They will not fight; it must not be," replied Kate. "It is Major Coningsby and his dragoons."

"Major *who*?" exclaimed Dick.

"Major Coningsby, the officer in command of the British troops who have encamped at my mother's. Both parties have come to seek us, I am certain, and if they knew that we were here, they surely would not fight each other, but both would turn against those Tory villains. Let us call to them, Mary, or wave our handkerchiefs, or do something to let them know that we are here and alive."

"Don't do that," said Dick, as Mary Forrest rose up from behind the bushes. "They are not shooting now, and I can run out and speak to Captain Forrest or somebody. Wait for me here, and I will soon return."

Before he could be prevented, the brave boy stepped out from behind the bushes, and ran toward the combatants. In his haste and eagerness he went on until he found himself nearly in the center of the space that was occupied by the three parties. Almost at the same moment the partisans, recovering from their surprise, poured a volley into their antagonists, and were immediately seconded by the flanking fire of the British. Under this combined attack, the greater part of the marauders and seamen broke and fled. The boy stood still for a moment, and then was startled by the loud voice of Van Vorst:

"Come here, Dicky! Come here, my boy!" exclaimed the ranger.

Quite bewildered, Dick again rushed forward, but in the direction of the British, and ran right into the arms of Major Coningsby, who was dismounted.

A yell, like that of a wild beast, was heard, and Van Vorst, with one arm hanging useless by his side, and his face covered with blood, leaped out from his cover.

"Come to me, Dick! Give me my boy! Give me my boy!" he screamed, as he brandished his sword and ran frantically toward the red-coats. He was answered by a shower of bullets, and fell, mortally wounded.

"What does this mean? Who are you, boy?" exclaimed the major, as he held up the little fellow, and looked in his face with an eager and wondering gaze.

"My name is George Colville Coningsby, and you are my father," answered the boy.

"It is true! God be thanked! I have found my son!"

"You are right there, major," gasped Van Vorst. "That is your boy, I reckon. He was brought from the North by the schooner yonder, and was given to me. I haven't treated him ill, as he will tell you. Come and speak to me, Dicky, for I liked you a heap, and I am

going to quit you now. I feel my feet slipping away from this world, and I am going to the devil, I suppose.

"Don't hurt him, father, for he has been kind to me," said the boy, as he knelt by the side of Van Vorst and took his hand.

"No one can hurt him now, my son," answered the major, "for he is dead."

As Major Coningsby spoke, a terrible explosion was heard, a volume of fire shot up from the schooner, her masts rose with a crash, the noise of dropping timber and other fragments was heard on every side, and then the scene was obscured by heavy clouds of smoke, and all was still.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FATE OF THE FIREFLY—CONCLUSION.

JANTS PETRIKIN had heard enough of the conversation between Malachi Slicker and the seamen to make him aware of the nature and full extent of the Yankee's plot against him, and he at once set his wits at work to foil the treachery of his partner.

When Malachi went back to Coombs's Hole, the Dutchman gave the crew a large keg of rum, and a number of bottles of Holland gin and other liquors, and sent them ashore to "enjoy themselves," a permission which they gladly accepted.

On the return of Malachi with the captives, he received them without making known his suspicions, and waited until his partner, who was overcome by fatigue, had fallen asleep. Then he pounced upon him, bound him securely, and gagged him so effectually that he could hardly breathe, and it was entirely impossible to speak.

Then the Dutchman quietly cast loose the lines of the Firefly, and let her drift out from the shore into the middle of the lagoon, where he dropped a kedge that was sufficient to hold her in that still water. Thus he had placed himself in a position to make terms with the crew on shore, as they had no boat, and he hoped, having their leader in his power, to be able to induce them to return to their duty. It was long after sunrise when his arrangements were completed, and when he released the three prisoners, sending them ashore in a light boat.

It had taken time to accomplish all this, and during that time the smuggler had not neglected to pay his devotions to a large case-bottle of Hollands. It was his doctrine that extra emergencies required extra stimulus, as well as extra exertions, and he proved his faith by drinking so much that he had nearly fallen asleep when he was hailed from the shore by Van Vorst and Ben Ducket.

When he saw that Van Vorst was endeavoring to make a raft, for the purpose of boarding the schooner, he roused himself from his lethargy, and succeeded, after considerable labor, in so placing a small cannon that the Firefly carried, that it could be trained on the float, from whatever direction it might approach.

He was quite "taken aback" by the appearance of Forrest's band, as he did not know who they were. He was well satisfied when they at-

tacked the marauders, but was unable to puzzle it out in his befogged brain what they were fighting for. When Major Coningsby arrived, however, and he recognized the red-coats of the British, he perceived that he was in a bad predicament, from which it would require the exertion of all his ability to escape.

He had already brought up from the cabin the strong-box that held his gold and silver and other valuables, and had placed in the Firefly's yawl, together with some clothing, provisions, water, and a plentiful supply of Hollands. As he had no force to assist him, he was unable to work the schooner out of the lagoon and through the narrow passage into the river, and his only chance was to save his life and his treasure by escaping in the small boat. Accordingly, he went below, and prepared a fuse to connect with the magazine, for he was determined to destroy the Firefly and his traitorous partner together. Then he returned on deck, and took the gag from the mouth of the Yankee, who had been lying on the hatchway, helpless, groaning, and frightened nearly to death.

"You can cuss and yell now, so much as you please, you Gonnetigut rascal!" said Petrikin, shaking his fist at Malachi in drunken spite. "I find you all out, you pig rogue. I find out dat you want to kill me, and take all my gold and dings, and sail off mit de schooner. I find you all out, and dat udder rascal, Van Vorst, and dat Ben Ducket, too. Dey all get killed, and I t'ink you get killed, too."

"Don't kill me," supplicated the Yankee. "Only let me live, and you may have all the gold and silver and everything else. Don't kill me, old partner!"

"I got him all now, and don't ask you. I put him in de yawl, and sail off mit him. Before I go, I sets fire to de schooner, and makes her burn up and blow up, and you and de Firefly all go mit de tuyfel togedder."

Malachi's only reply was a yell of agony, and the Dutch-man again went below, and lighted the fuse. When he came on deck again, he walked to the yawl, which lay alongside of the schooner, but paused at the bulwark, with one leg over the rail, to give the screaming victim a parting "blessing."

"You yell now joost so much like you please, you Gonnetigut rascal. Dey's all too busy to bear your noise, and in fifteen minutes you blow up mit de schooner. I joost step into de yawl—so—and go down de river, while you go up into de air. Yawl!"

The smuggler was not to take the step. He had lighted his fuse with an unsteady hand, or it had been too short, or it had burned too rapidly, or some other accident had happened, for the words were hardly out of his mouth, when the deck bulged upward, smoke and flames burst out from the schooner, there was a terrific explosion, and the Firefly was numbered among the things that were, both of her rascally owners sharing her fearful fate.

The explosion caused the greatest surprise and consternation among the contending parties on shore, and it was some minutes before they were able to realize what had happened. The rain of fragments from the shattered vessel, however, and the commotion of the water, soon made

the truth evident to them, and they again turned their attention to the position of affairs on shore.

All the marauders and seamen, who had not been killed or disabled, had sought refuge in flight, but the partisans and the red-coats still faced each other. Harry Forrest, who had not observed the action of the British in firing upon Van Vorst and his gang, could only expect that they intended to attack him, and he prepared for a desperate battle.

"Come on, you rascally red-coats," he shouted. "Come on, and we will show you how men can fight for liberty! Close up, my brave fellows, and remember that you are striking for your country!"

"Hold!" exclaimed Frank Swinton, riding out in front, with a white handkerchief on his sword. "There is a truce, Captain Forrest. Major Coningsby and I have agreed that there shall be peace between us, until the purpose is accomplished for which we have all come here."

This declaration being indorsed by Major Coningsby, the two parties that had lately been arrayed against each other with hostile intent, joined hands and mingled together with a feeling of relief. A portion of them searched the woods for the fugitive marauders, and the remainder gathered around the British and partisan leaders.

It was a joyful scene when Mary Forrest and Kate Swinton were restored to their brothers. They were heartily congratulated by Major Coningsby, as soon as his transports were sufficiently moderated to permit him to notice any one besides, his recovered boy.

Horses were procured for the ladies, and the British and their American enemies (leaving a sufficient party to bury the dead and take care of the prisoners and the recovered negroes) amicably took up their line of march together for the residences of Colonel Forrest and Mrs. Swinton. George Coningsby related his adventures on the way, and the young ladies and Harry Forrest told of his bravery in endeavoring to assist the captives, delighting the major with their praises of his boy.

At nightfall their destinations were reached; the truce was ended, and the late friends again became enemies and separated, hoping that they would not be obliged to meet as foes any more. Their hopes were realized, for it was not long before the surrender of Cornwallis gave peace to the country, and among the other blessings of peace Harry Forrest and Frank Swinton enjoyed that of being united to the ladies of their love.

Major Coningsby was induced, by entreaties of his son and his new friends, to resign his commission, and take up his residence in the New World, after settling his affairs in England.

Tom Murphy, who had been taken prisoner, was spared by Forrest, and returned to his old mother, who continued, to the day of her death, to read her Bible and abuse her cats and dogs.

The tradition of the strong-box of the Firefly has not been forgotten, and many credulous persons have sought for it, but it has not yet been found.

THE END.

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